SUNDAY MORNING NO. 147
THE TRUE AGNOSTICISM

The reading from the apostolic writings this morning (1 Cor. 8) deals with a state of things to which we have no relation; but, nevertheless, develops principles that as much affect the life of saints in the nineteenth century as in the first. We have nothing to do with *"things offered unto idols,"* but we have much to do with the things that enter into Paul's argument about them. He speaks of *"knowledge"* and *"charity"* (or love). We all, he says, have knowledge; but he gives us to understand that this is not all-sufficient in the regulation of the inner man. Knowledge, he says, puffeth up.

Every man of observation and reflection must agree with Paul as to this. Knowledge undoubtedly by itself, has the effect of inflating the pride of the natural man. You see it in childhood in its most naked form. As soon as a child knows a little more than its neighbour, it exhibits the propensity to glory over its neighbour, and feel important on that account. It makes no disguise of its feelings. The puffing up is quite manifest in its own little swelling, and in the puffs of scorn that escape its poor little windbag towards its less favoured comrades. The feeling and the manifestation moderate somewhat with the advance of life; but they both remain if no counter current of wisdom set in. Wisdom will come with adversity, and modesty and consideration for others, with Scriptural enlightenment. But if these are not brought to bear, the pride of nature will continue, as we see in the world.

There is no more prominent characteristic of the worldly mind than this puff-upedness on various grounds. The pride of intellect stands foremost perhaps—the pride of knowledge—the self-consequence of knowing more than men in common. It is a poor, beggarly, contemptible, irrational sentiment, which lowers its possessor in the ratio of its height. Nothing more thoroughly reduces a man's consequence in creation than self-assessment. It is not what a man thinks of himself, but what he is to others—what he is to God—that determine his measure; and this measure it is not he that can estimate or proclaim. Yea, no one's reckoning of it is so low as his.

Knowledge is good as the foundation, but, by itself, it is as naked and useless as a foundation would be upon which no house was built. It appeals to only one department of the mind—a department essential in its right relation, but waste and without function if not adjusted to the end it is designed to serve. The mental structure is more largely occupied with other powers and capacities; and if these are not served by knowledge, knowledge is only so much inflating gas, escaping in noxious puffs into the surrounding atmosphere instead of giving a benevolent flame of light in the darkness. *"We all have knowledge,"* in the common and average sense: yet what is our highest knowledge that any man should be puffed up by it? Here Paul makes a statement which has mystified many people, and yet expresses a profundity of philosophic truth that the human intellect has only in modern times begun to reach.

> *"If any man thinketh that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know."*

It is a maxim of the German philosophy that "all that we know is that nothing can be known." This is a little like Paul's statement. There is no particular weight to be attached to the German maxim. I refer to it only to show that the wisdom of this world, after the deepest metaphysical borings, is obliged to call a halt at the impenetrable adamant of primeval truth, which, in still more modern phrase, it pronounces "unknowable." Paul and modern science stand on common ground here, that they both recognise that that man only has attained true knowledge who has come to see that below a certain point nothing can be known.

But the simpler mind will say, "What is the meaning of it? Surely knowledge is the great and the attainable and the valuable thing we are to seek? Surely knowledge of all kinds abounds on the right hand or on the left: —knowledge of language, knowledge of history, knowledge of the human frame, knowledge of the earth, knowledge of the stars, &c. Surely we can seek knowledge and find it. What then is the meaning of this strange talk of nothing being knowable? It is strange to us. We cannot understand." Yes, it will seem very strange to those who look only on the proximate forms of knowledge referred to. That is not the knowledge Paul refers to, or that modern philosophy refers to. Such things as these can be known; but these are all on the surface of things. There are questions underlying all these—untouched by all these—questions as to the nature of all things in the abstract, how things exist; how they originated, what they are in themselves, after what principle or plan they are regulated, with what object they have being, &c., &c. On these questions the ancients speculated and formed theories, which were known as philosophical. Paul pronounced them *"vain deceit;"* and time has demonstrated the truthfulness of Paul's condemnation. Ancient philosophy is now rejected as a mass of fable. Paul declared the impossibility of knowing anything in the philosophical sense, and modern science has endorsed his position, and every man of any reflective power must see how inevitable the conclusion is. All that we can know is the class of knowledge comprehended in the term *phenomena.* We may know things and occurrences, and their mutual relations; but below this we have no capacity to go. We know there is a universe: the cause of it, the nature of it, the origin of it, the purpose of it, we cannot know. Even the extent of it is beyond our conception. We know it is related to space and constructed on a definite scale, of which we ourselves are part. We know something of the relation of some of its cunningly-adjusted forces: but this knowledge is dim and on the surface. Any man with eyes to see stands bewildered in the contemplation of immeasurable immensity on the one hand, and the inscrutable essence of the smallest objects on the other.

You may think there is little value, one way or other, in this recognition of our intellectual impotence in the presence of the mystery of creation. Experience will show you a different view on this point. It is of great practical value to know that in the old philosophical sense, a man can know nothing. It helps to inspire that true, and beautiful, and rational modesty which is at the other extreme from that puffing up of which Paul speaks. It puts a man into the child-like position of asking simply what is true, and unburdening himself of all impossible and insoluble problems as to the whys and wherefores. It clears the ground intellectually for the reception of all facts—not those only that we can see, but for those otherwise demonstrated to exist; not only for those that nature exhibits to our senses, but for those that come to us through the authenticated testimony of other men of other ages; not only for those that relate to the proximate aspects of nature, but for those that concern Nature's inner and moving Power, whose purpose is confessedly as yet unfinished in the state of things now existing on the earth.

It is here where Paul's application of the know-nothing principle differs from the polite agnosticism of the age in which we live. While Paul says you cannot know the universe philosophically, he says you can know its proximate bearings on you in a practical way, whether those relate to the life you now have or to that which is to come. But modern agnosticism limits this position to life that now is: and says "I know nothing and can know nothing; but I know I require money and mutton for present convenience, and these I shall do my utmost to obtain. As for the life to come, I know nothing about that." Here it is inconsistent. We have just the same means of knowing of the life to come that we have of knowing the present life. It is a question of experience, and not all our own. We know the present life by personal experience, but we know much of it by other men's experience, whose testimony under conditions we receive: and we may learn of the life to come in just the same way. It comes to us in the personal witness of Jesus and the Apostles, of whom Paul

was one—though *"born out of due time."* The nature of it can be no bar to our reception of it; it is fact, not theory, that is the guide. But modern agnosticism is invincible to facts that lie in an uncongenial direction. It is in fact the pride of human intellect agnostically manifested in opposition to God.

Paul's application of the true agnosticism is beautiful and comforting. Though a man may not know anything in the sense vaunted by philosophy, he may attain this high distinction that *"if any man love God, the same is* ***known of Him****."* We cannot know God in the sense of understanding him, any more than the scientists can understand their "force." But we can know that He exists, by the witness He has given of His existence in Jewish history, as well as by the manifest impress of His wisdom, and display of His power in creation. Knowing this of His existence, it is an easy step (more particularly when we make His acquaintance in the reading of the Scriptures), to reach the point of loving Him; for there is everything in Him to create love. We love that which is lovely: and there is no form of loveliness conceivable to the heart of man that does not exist in abounding fullness in the Father of the Universe, as exhibited to us in nature and revelation—light, wisdom, power, goodness, excellence, beauty—ineffable. The love of God is the highest and most delightful exercise of which the human mind is capable. The faculty of reverence is at the very summit of the cerebral organization. It is highest in position—highest in nature—of all the faculties with which man is gifted. It is but poorly developed in the bulk of mankind. The present circumstances of the human race check its exercise and blight its growth. Like every other faculty—whether of music, knowledge, numbers, or what not—it requires culture to bring it out, and this culture is, as yet, among the world's unsupplied needs, and will remain on that list till the appointed revolution will give the world everywhere the right government, with power and wisdom to supply all that is needful for the blessing of mankind. Meanwhile, its culture lies in the truth. If a man will submit himself to this, the Scriptures are able to develop in him the new and glorious inner man, which is fashioned in the image of Christ. He will *"love God,"* and *"if any man love God, the same is known of Him"*—noted by Him—recognised by Him—valued by Him—directed by Him. This is the highest position to which mortal can meanwhile rise in the universe—to be favourably regarded by the Upholder of the Universe. To some it may seem even too high for belief. Brethren and sisters, open your minds to it. It is a fact—a fact revealed—a fact attested—a fact that is true, independently of our capacity to realise it. It is a glorious fact; a fact full of power and comfort. David himself laid hold of it:

> *"I am small and despised:* ***yet the Lord thinketh on me."***

Christ pressed it on the attention of the disciples.

> *"Have faith in God: He careth for you."*
>
> *"The Father himself, from His high and lofty throne in the heart of heaven's boundless realms invites us to receive it."*
>
> *"Look unto Me . . . to this man will I look, that is of a contrite and humble spirit."*
>
> *"If any man love God, the same is known of Him."*

A man might formulate sublime theories of God: but this could be no ground of God's regard. What are the highest efforts of human reason in the presence of the stupendous verities of the endless ages, and the measureless immensities?

> *"The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise that they are vain."*

His profoundest theorisings must seem pitiful to His calm and universal and unsearchable power—the mere phosphorescent flicker of dead fish in the night—ghastly creatures when the sun rises. The mortal and the finite cannot compass the eternal. When man has put forth his highest efforts, he is compelled to give in—and to sink discomfited—weary and fatigued, hopelessly baffled in the unavailing endeavour to conceive to his mind the eternal abstraction

upon which the universe is built. What pleasure can such human floundering yield to God? But the love of God, God delights in.

> *"The Lord taketh pleasure in the righteous. . . . He taketh pleasure in them that fear Him; in them that hope in His mercy."*

This is enough. Here is ground on which the simplest can stand with the wisest: "I cannot grasp God: but I love Him." This is the attitude of true wisdom: the place of all comfort: for,

> *"If God be for us, who can be against us?"*

And God is for us if we are for Him. To be for God is to submit to what He has revealed, and choose the things wherein He delights, and to carefully walk in the way of His commandments. Abandon, then, the bootless and aching search after the unsearchable. Accept the fact—attested glorious, and all-sufficient, that God is, and that He is the Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him—the method of which He has revealed to us in His glorious Son, the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth.

> *"Knowledge* (of the philosophical order) *puffeth up, but charity edifieth."*

It is edification we want, —building up in the fortitude that comes of conviction—in the noble resolves that come of faith in Christ—in the enlightened policy of life that comes with the full assurance of understanding of the truth concerning Him. Charity aims at this and tends to this, one among another—not the "charity" of modern English phrase; but the charity of Paul's language. This charity he defines, so that the subject is free from mist. It is in reality a state of mind that incorporates in itself a variety of excellent features.

> *"Charity,"* he says, *"suffereth long and is kind: charity envieth not: charity vaunteth not itself: is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth."*

A state of mind like this does edify and build up and strengthen. Metaphysical hair-splitting has the opposite effect—pulls down, weakens, and distresses. Paul's advice is—cultivate one and avoid the other. He practically indicates what he means in the application he gives it. The application is, as I have already said, to something we have nothing to do with it, —the eating of the things offered in sacrifice to idols, but the principle belongs to many things. He sums it up in these words:

> *"Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak."*

The essence of this counsel lies in another precept,

> *"Consider one another."*

Apostolic charity kindly takes a neighbour's well-being into account in deciding its own actions, especially in the case of those whom he describes as *"them that are weak."* This is just the class, as a rule, that men leave out of account, and they do it on the very ground of their weakness. Well, we are to go by apostolic, and not by worldly, precept. The apostolic precept is, don't deal with brethren merely on the basis of knowledge: knowledge is good, but let charity have a large place.

> "*We that are strong ought to bear with them that are weak and not to please ourselves!"*

The weakness in the case refers to questions of conscience. Brethren may think things wrong that are not wrong; and if such see others do these things, they may be led to the doing of them against their own consciences, and therefore to the doing of other things that are really wrong—for a man who does what he thinks wrong, even if it may not be wrong, is liable to throw overboard scruples about what is really wrong. Paul's argument is that the example of strong-minded brethren in matters of liberty in things not wrong, but by some considered wrong, may operate hurtfully on those who are weak—even to their destruction: for he adds—

> *"Through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died."*

And his own resolution in the case is thus expressed:

> *"Wherefore if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."*

This is the kind of resolution to which *"charity"* would lead to as defined by him; and without this charity, he says, a man is nothing, even if he *"understand all mysteries and all knowledge."* (1 Cor. 13:2.) The modern form of this circumspection will be suggested by experience. There are many things in which a man of understanding would feel at liberty as between himself and God, in which if he be a man of charity, he voluntarily curtails his liberty by a consideration of the hurtful effects liable to result to others from its exercise. His circumspection is strengthened by a contemplation of Paul's solemn words—

> *"When ye sin so against the brethren and wound their weak conscience,* ***ye sin against Christ."***

Whatever we do, whether in eating or drinking, or going out or coming in, a man of charity will consider his neighbour, and do all to the glory of God, that the name of Jesus may be glorified and the precepts of Christ prevail. The man who pleases only himself is not a man of charity, and we have Paul's authority for it that such a man cannot enter into the kingdom of God to whatsoever degree of intellectual enlightenment or spiritual gift he may have attained.

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