

## HUMAN EVANESCENCE AND GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE

In the chapter read this morning, we have Paul commanding the Corinthians to “*let all things be done unto edifying.*” In this, he refers particularly to speaking at the ecclesial assemblies; for this is his subject. He refers to some who edified themselves, but not the ecclesia, and such he commanded to be silent. This is according to reason. The usefulness of a man’s speaking (or writing) is to be measured by the pleasure it imparts to others, and not by the satisfaction it may afford to himself. The man who enjoys his own rhetorical performances is, as a rule, a failure as regards others. It is also nearly a rule that those who speak with most profit to the hearers, are the least satisfactory to themselves. The point to aim at, the standard to judge by, is the edification of those who listen, —

*“Seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the ecclesia.”*

What is this “*edifying*”? It is more than entertainment. A man may be an entertaining speaker, without being an edifying speaker. Edification is building up, strengthening the convictions of the mind in things pertaining to God. Some men weaken those convictions. Some men are as a debilitating air on the vegetation which droops under the influence; others may even be as a flood devastating the land, and washing away the growing plants. Some are mere lime-water squirts, causing blight where the drops fall. There are all sorts. Let us seek to excel in comforting and fortifying. This is to be done by bringing to bear those considerations which in their distinct apprehension result in the mental ardour of conviction and decision. Let us try the process with the materials before us this morning.

We have had singing and reading in the things of the Spirit, some things concerning man, and some things concerning God. We have been singing of frail man, whose days are like the grass; “*as a flower of field he grows.*” There may not appear to be much of an element of edification in this; but there is much. It is one of the leading facts in the enlightened resolution that springs from edification. The forgetting of it is one of the principal causes of the folly that is universal. Here we are for only a few days, and yet people go on living as if they would live forever. Each man believes that all the rest are mortal, but concerning himself, he has a difficulty in realising that it is quite so with him. It must be evident that whatever helps to break in upon this illusion is edifying. It is profitable then to dwell on the fact of human evanescence. It is not moroseness to do this, it is common sense. It is part of ordinary wisdom to recognise that “*life is but as a vapour that appeareth for a very little while and then vanisheth away.*” Whatever helps us to do so is good. It is on this principle that Solomon says—

*“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.”*

We must die, and it is no use averting the face from the fact. Most people are frightened at coffins, skulls, and graveyards. Why should they? These are the facts we cannot get away from. Looking at them will help us to be wise; looking away will not abolish them, but may unfit us for adjusting ourselves to them. This is where pleasure-following is hurtful. It indisposes the mind to deal with facts as they are, and leads to the fostering of illusions. The things of God have a feeble light to the eye dazed with spectacular displays which please and dazzle: the heart kept in a simmer of frivolous mirth; or the mind engaged on passing human

things. People who follow that line of things live as fools, and cannot do otherwise: for wisdom is not innate; and it is not in the power of pleasure to put it in. Living as fools, the future is always a subject of dread to them, and they die in despair. Shall we mope then, and be dejected, and miserable—thinking only of crape and dust and worms? There is no cheer like the cheerfulness of a sound mind. Believers of the Truth can say with Paul, with a true force and weight—

*“God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love and of a sound mind.”*

But the cheerfulness does not come from the gloomy side of human life. If there were nothing else to think of than the frailty of perishing man, of which we have been singing, there could be no cheerfulness but the cheerfulness of inebriation:

*“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”*

But there is something else to think of—much else—which when grafted on the evil, turns it into satisfaction and joy. We have been singing of God as well as man. Here is where the light comes in—the light of wisdom, joy and hope and holiness. We have been singing of His “uncreate unity.” This is not a mere phrase; it is expressive of a fact as apparent and inevitable as the sun is to the eye. Yet it is a fact subtle and stupendous. It takes us into the realms of truth too high for mortal faculty; but we will not turn away. The sun is too great a thing for us to grasp, but we accept it with satisfaction and rejoice in its light. So God in His uncreate unity is a rock of strength and a bed of rest and comfort to the mind, though beyond comprehension. We know some little of what we mean. By unity we intend oneness, a something that cannot be separated into parts. Can you separate the light of a candle into parts? It is one yet you know not how. The mode of its subsistence in unity eludes intellectual effort. How much more the light of the sun. How much more the power and light of the universe. There is a unity comprehending all. Lift your eyes to the starry host, though the individual stars, suns and worlds are separate from one another, they are embraced in ONE POWER, they are one system, there is the reign of one law. There is no antagonism or division anywhere.

What is this universal, invisible, all-embracing energy, which interpenetrates immensity, and holds the countless orbs of the universe in one grasp? Human knowledge cannot tell. Human knowledge confesses it cannot tell. In its most pretentious modern form, it plainly says, “I do not know!” It goes further: it says, “it is unknowable.” From this it takes its latest name: agnosticism: un-knowingism: a true and modest title, as applied to what man can learn for himself of such profundities. But does it follow that because man does not know, this universal power has no knowledge of itself? Is man’s knowledge the highest? Is it possible it should be so? The power that has formed the human brain, should it not know? Here the Bible steps in. what man cannot know concerning the power of all things, the power of all things has revealed. God at sundry times, in divers manners, has spoken. God says—

*“I have created all things; I made man; I made the stars” (Isa. 66:2, 40:24-26; Jer. 27:5).*

*“I fill heaven and earth” (Jer.23: 24).*

He says *“I am everywhere present. To whom will ye liken Me?”* He enquires (Psa. 139:7-12; Isa. 40:25).

Here then is rest for the mind in the “uncreate unity.” We need not, we cannot go a hair’s breadth further than this. To know God is enough; how He is we cannot know. We cannot even know how our own brains work. Why need we trouble about them? From everlasting He is the “uncreate unity”—stupendous—overwhelming in his unutterable greatness—God.

Thinking only of His greatness, we are liable to a feeling that can only be expressed by the word “crushed.” It seems as if we were too insignificant to be objects of His notice; as even the earth itself was too small for His care. This feeling which is not according to truth, is dissipated by the addition of another word which we often find associated with His name in the Scriptures: “*My God.*” True it is that it is mostly the spirit of Christ that thus addresses the Creator but it is also employed by the humblest of his servants: Moses, Samuel, David, Daniel, Nehemiah and others (Deut. 4:5; 1 Sam. 12:19; Dan. 9:18; Neh. 13:31) as Jesus said—

*“I ascend to my Father and your Father: to my God and ‘your’ God” (John 20:17).*

He has been pleased in His earth communications to describe Himself as the God of Abraham, as the God of Isaac, as the God of Jacob. In this, the terror of His vastness disappears. He comes near. He is love.

*“He humbles Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth” (Psa. 113:6).*

He is not only the God of the terrible universe, but the God of all its details, and therefore of a poor afflicted world and the poor afflicted race upon it, who in Him live and move and have their being. Here is where the joy comes in. It may be asked, what joy is there in an abstraction like this, seeing that evil reigns, and seeing that it would appear as if God were indifferent to the earth He has made and the human race upon it?

There is an answer that follows as naturally as the formation of water from the juncture of warmth and ice. Give us god and man, and it follows that there must be a purpose of beneficence involved in their mutual relations, however difficult to discern at any given moment. We could not of ourselves know anything definite about this. Without information from God, we could only speculate as philosophers in all ages have speculated, and our speculations must needs be as bootless as theirs. Nevertheless, the existence of such an abstract necessary conclusion imparts an intellectual bias that prepares the way for the information that has been given; the glorious information. God has revealed Himself to Israel’s race, at sundry times and in diverse manners. He has announced His intentions and made great and precious promises to which He has pledged Himself by covenant, which covenant he has ratified and confirmed in a public manner by Christ. Those intentions and promises give us a ground of hope that we could not otherwise entertain. He has declared His purpose to fill the earth with glory and blessing at last, through Abraham and his seed. And so practical is the definition of the glory of the blessing that we know the shape it will take and the effect it will have. He will set up by the hands of Christ a Kingdom, which will gather all mankind into its fold, and bless them with plenty and enlightenment. He will redeem from death. He will abolish every curse, and remove every evil. There shall be no more pain or sorrow, nor affliction. The inhabitants of the earth will at last be immortal in nature and perfect in mind. Everlasting joy is the prospect ahead.

The very greatness of God comes in here as a pledge. Nothing can be too good or too great for Him to accomplish. It is merely a question of His purpose, and this He has declared. We have but to rest on it, which pleases Him. The reverse state of mind disqualifies any mortal being for His regard. Without faith it is impossible to please Him. This is testified, and it recalls our attention to the fact that our individual relation to Him is an affair of condition. He is revealed as the *'God of Israel'* but He is not God of every individual Israelite.

A whole generation of them perished in the wilderness for their insubordination, and only a few in all their generations pleased him. Of them He says *"they shall be Mine in that day that I make up My jewels."* As Paul says, "they are not all Israel that are of Israel." But though the God of Israel, the other races of mankind are eligible for His regard and gracious intentions, if they conform to His will.

*"Is He the God of the Jews?" "Is He not the God of the Gentiles also?"* enquires Paul, which he answers by saying *"Yes, of the Gentiles also."*

But as He is not the God of every individual Israelite, He is far from being the God of every individual Gentile. Paul reminds the Ephesians that when he came to them with the gospel—

*"At that time, they had no hope, and were without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).*

At that time he further says, they *"walked according to the course of this world,"* in fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as others. But God who is rich in mercy by the great love wherewith He had loved them, even when they were dead in sins, had quickened them together with Christ, that in the ages to come, He might show the exceeding riches of His grace, and His kindness towards them, through Christ Jesus. We cannot too scrupulously recognise that God has nothing but disfavour for Jew and Gentile who walk in darkness. He entrusted the Apostles with a mission of invitation to all who had ears to hear. The invitation was to come out of the darkness into the light. The terms of the invitation are paraphrased in a variety of ways. The meaning in each case is the same. It is plainly discernible in the words:

*"Come out from among them and be ye separate, and I will receive you and ye shall be My sons and daughters."*

This separation offends human vanity on the part of those from whom the separation is made, and creates enemies. But this has to be submitted to. God requires it. We can but make the sacrifice if He is to be our God.

*"The friendship of the world is enmity with God" (Jas. 4:4).*

It is hard to understand the state of any man's mind who would hesitate to make the sacrifice, if he is persuaded that God has made the demand. Doubt of His word or work would explain uncertainty. There is no ground for doubt when the whole case is before the mind. Even to our generation, who have not seen with our eyes the wonderful works of God, God has given every evidence that a time of silence admits of. Look at the remarkable instance we have in the chapter before us. It may not seem an instance at all. But let us see. What is Paul's object in the chapter? (1 Cor. 14). To induce the Corinthians to observe order

in their ecclesial exercises. What exercises? The delivery of speeches? Something much beyond this. The gifts of the Spirit, and the way to use them, are in question. He had said (12:7),

*“The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man (that is, among you) to profit withal.”*

He meant the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, of which he said there were diversities (v. 4). He makes his meaning quite plain.

*“To one,” says he, “is given by the Spirit, the words of wisdom . . . to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another divers kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.”*

The object of these gifts of the Spirit is defined in Heb. 2:4:

*“God bearing witness (to the testimony of the Truth) both with signs and wonders, and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit;” and (Eph. 4:12)—  
“Gave gifts unto men . . . some apostles, some prophets, etc., for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”*

The Corinthians were in the possession of these gifts of the Spirit, but they had fallen into a disorderly way of employing them.

*“Every one of you,” says Paul “...hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation” (v. 26).*

A brother finding himself in possession of a gift of the Spirit, seemed to think it was his duty to yield to the impulse without regard to convenience or suitability. A number would speak at once with no result but confusion.

*“How is this?” enquires Paul. “God is not the author of confusion” (v. 33).*

God had given miraculous gifts but He expected them to be used in a rational manner as with natural gifts.

*“The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (v.32).*

Therefore, he advises that if anything is revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace, that is if the new matter is of a character that will edify the body. If not, he is to be silent. If it be a tongue, and there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the ecclesia. Let him speak to himself and to God.

*“If”, says he, “ye all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned and unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy (that is, speaking to men to edification, exhortation, and comfort)—(see v.3), and there come in one that believeth not, he is convinced” etc., (vv. 23-24).*

Now, the question to be considered is—how came Paul to indulge in this strenuous plea for an orderly and rational use of miraculous power? Was it not the existence of a disorderly use? It is impossible to suggest or imagine another reason. What follows? That the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were a common and notorious possession in the midst of the Corinthian ecclesia, as with Paul himself, for he says,

*“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than ye all, yet, in the ecclesia, I would rather speak five words with my understanding than by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue” (vv. 18-19).*

Tongues, he goes on to say, were a sign to unbelievers, and not bestowed for the private use of believers. In what way they operated as a sign we learn from Acts 2:6-13.

The point lies here—this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians, is an actual proof and monument in this 19<sup>th</sup> century, of the gifts of the Spirit having existed in the first century. And if they existed then, what follows? That the testimony of the apostles was divine, a true testimony; that Christ rose; that God exists; that His law is righteousness; that His purpose is sure; that Christ will return; that human life will be redeemed from the cloud and darkness that now overspread it; and that the earth will be filled with the peerless glory of the Creator, as He has promised.

This is extracting conviction from the facts before us. Out of conviction comes action. Out of action will come the blessed result that God has associated with it as fruit from seed sown. A patient continuance in well-doing which He has prescribed will end in glory and honour and immortality in the happy day of earth’s redemption.

*“Though now for a season, if need be, we are in heaviness through manifold temptations, the trial of our faith, like gold tried in the fire, will be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Christ.”*

Let us therefore earnestly heed the exhortation that Paul administers in those weighty words:

*“Be ye therefore steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”*

Taken from: - “Seasons of Comfort” Vol. 2 Pages 184-190 By Bro Robert Roberts