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THE REFORM OF THE GOSPEL.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church, Sabbath morning, Fredricton, Aug 26th., 1888.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ—by grace ye are saved—and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in Heavenly places in Christ Jesus."—EPIH. II. 4-6.

We hear much of reforms and reform movements to-day, and what they are doing, and what is hoped for them. The papers are full of them. The lecture platform discusses them. The pulpit preaches them. The people talk about them. Men and women band themselves together to work them out. We have temperance reforms. We have political reforms. We have social reforms. We have religious reforms, church reforms, reforms of all kinds. Every now and again men wake up possessed with a new idea on some one or other of the great life-questions that concern society, and with souls on fire they set out to give the world the benefit of their new idea and work out their so-called reform. This has been the case since the days of Seth. And indeed there has been all along, and there is still, great need of reform-work. Evils of all kinds prevail, and it is by reform work earnest men would counteract those evils and save the world.

But reform movements have not always been successful. I do not think I am putting it more strongly than I should put it when I say, the cure has been in some cases almost worse than the disease. They have proved failures, they were partial, insufficient, superficial, temporary. They did not go down to the roots of the evils to be destroyed, and they failed; and not only did they fail as reforms, but some of those so-called reforms have themselves come to be evils, or have given rise to evils, that need to be reformed quite as much as the evils they were designed to correct. Some of the religions of the world to day are of this character. Mohammedanism, for instance, was a great advance upon the old degrading polytheism of the Arab tribes. Considering everything it was indeed a wondrous reform in faith and life the prophet of Islamism succeeded in working out for his countrymen. But that religion is today a moral and spiritual gangrene eating deep into all the life and loveliness of the east, a gangrene that must yet be cut out by the sword.

The temperance-reform again, which is one of the grandest of these modern times, one that has done incalculable good to the world in the way of educating the public conscience to the enormity of the evils of intemperance, and of preventing and checking and eradicating the vice, has not been an unmixed good. In many places it leads on to dissipations of another kind which are no less fatal to good morals and real earnest usefulness and christian living.

The churches again, as we have them, are not without their baneful influence upon society, and come short in what they might be and do for the world. Let us not feel that we are all, nor nearly all, we ought to be and might be as a church for good, not as alive to our duty, not as progressive and aggressive, not as eager and successful in winning souls and gathering in out of the world of the lost. But the longer I live, the more and more convinced I am, that the hope of the world is in the churchest. Let us as a church more and more adapt ourselves in our methods of work to the needs of society, the wants of the world around us to day, and let us more and more preach the old gospel of salvation by grace, and we ought to succeed, and will succeed. I feel that we have here the only reform that will save the world, the reform of the gospel.

And first, observe, the reform of the gospel begins with man as a moral wreck. It begins with him as not simply somewhat injured by the fall, but as wrecked, as not simply knocked a little out of the straight, but as all wrong—head wrong, heart wrong, life wrong." "Dead in trespasses and sins," as the apostle puts it here, or as Jeremiah put it for us in our tent last Sabbath morning: "The heart deceitful above all things and desperately wicked,"—that is where the gospel reform begins with a man, and you cannot begin any lower down with a man than that. You begin at the bottom when you begin there.

You regard him as beyond the reach of ordinary reform, as where reform can do nothing for him, for there is nothing that reform can work with and build upon, as where a new foundation of moral principle must be laid, a new creation, if there is to be reform.

That is where Paul used always to begin in working out his reforms. Wherever he went, and he went to all the leading cities of the world at the time, he assumed that men were so bad morally and spiritually, that they could not be reformed, that mere reform as ordinarily understood was impossible, and that any labor spent in that direction was worse than useless. Some of his hearers were Jews, and were full of ideas as to how good they were. Others were Greek philosophers and had high ideas as to what philosophy could do for them and the world. Others still were barbarians, given over to the most degrading vices, and having but little to hope for either here or hereafter. How widely different the social standing, the moral character, the intellectual ability, the educational refinement, the religious training, and the manner of life, of his hearers! But Paul made no difference. He had not one Gospel for the Jew, another for the Greek philosopher, a third for the rude unlettered barbarian. No! he regarded them all as in the same condemnation, as dead in sin. It was a humbling gospel to the Jew and the proud Greek scientist, and they did not like it. They kicked against it with both feet. They said, the cities of Athens and Ephesus, Corinth and Rome, will not stand such teaching. It may do for the slave, but it will not do for his master. It may suit the poor man, but not the rich man, still, the great reformer of the first century heeded not what the would-be wise of his day said about the gospel he preached, but he kept on preaching it to all classes of the people, and it won its way.

Now, it is just here where a true reform differs essentially from a false, a spurious reform. The most of reforms assume that man is not so far gone in sin but that he can be reclaimed, reformed. They find something good, or something that looks like the good, to start with, and from that starting-point they work out a reform, and sometimes the reform looks well, promises well, and does well. But such a reform has no real foundation, and it cannot stand. Man is utterly gone in sin. There is no good in him, but only evil. That is the only true starting-point of a real reform for any man. Any view of him but that, and that is about the worst view you can take of him, is not the right view to take of him, not the gospel's view of him. To pat him on the head, and say, "Oh! you are a very good fellow! You will come out all right yet," is to encourage him in the way of death; it is not to help him, but hurt him. Give up hoping for a man, in himself, coming to be anything, and let him come to that, and then you are where the hope of the gospel can take hold and begin to do something. So long as a man thinks he is all right, and can do something for himself, or can be done with by others, nothing really useful and good can be done for him. His reform is hopeless. Dead in trespasses and sins, walking according to the course of this world, under the influence of the devil, serving the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the base desires of the unrenewed nature, children of wrath;—that is where we are, and what we are, when the gospel finds us, and the sooner we come to recognize and realize that, the better for us, the more hope there is of our real reform.

The second step in the process of spiritual reform, according to the text, observe, is the gracious quickening of the Divine Spirit. But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ."

We do not like God naturally. We hate Him. We have a dread of Him. We wish sometimes there was no God, and there are those who wish there was no God until they come to feel and think there is no God. When men come to think that, then they do not care how it is with them, and are hardened in evil, for they are not afraid of being called to account at last. We think God so harsh, so unfeeling, so overbearing and enacting and cruel. But that is not the truth about God. That is not the teaching of the Bible about God. We read here of His mercy. He is rich in mercy. If there is a loving heart in the universe, that heart is God's. If there is an eye of pity to pity human sorrows and woes, and a hand ready to help the helpless

and fallen, that eye of pity and that hand of help are God's. He loves not only the lovely, the good, the christians; He loves sinners.

Here is a man dead in sin. All he cares about is to do wrong. He has come to where he can enjoy sin, roll it as a sweet morsel under his tongue, revel in it. His conscience does not trouble him much. The fear of God—he has no fear of God; he has got past that. The dread of Hell, the future, the day of judgment, the Lord's second coming—all that has ceased to concern him. They are the fancies and foolish notions of silly christians. He sins straight along. He abandoned himself to every sort of evils perhaps, and has no regard for himself or others. We find men now and again as dead in sin as that. And yet God has not necessarily ceased to love such vile men. I read here: "even when we were dead in sins," He loved us. And He loved us with a great love. He so loved us that He gave us His only begotten son to die for us, and that was love indeed.

The great sinners, the dead in sin, the hopeless cases, the very wicked, the hardened and reprobate, the poor drunkards wallowing in the street-gutter, the low and the lapsed who have gone far away from God, we take but little interest in, and we do not think of God taking much of an interest in them. And yet, the God of mercy does take an interest in those sinners. He loves them with His great love notwithstanding their sins. He yearns after them as a true father yearns after his erring son. His spirit goes out after them into their sins, and takes hold of their hearts, and deals with them we know not how much, and quickens them sometimes into a life that is life in Jesus. No; let us not despise the vilest sinner, for the God of grace may take that vile sinner, and make of him a glorious saint. The Pauls and Bunyans and Newtons and Mary Magdalenes were the chief of sinners, and the grace of God reached them and made them the chief of saints. And what grace has done once, yea a thousand times, grace can do again, and for us and others.

This is what I wish you to notice specially here, that God quickens the dead sinner into life, and only God can do it. You say perhaps the sinner is not really dead. It is only a figurative way of speaking of him to speak of him as dead. If he was dead we would know what to do with him. We would bury him. But he is not dead. He lives, and does evil with a wicked earnestness.

And yet, Paul is making no mistake in speaking of the sinner in his natural state as dead in trespasses and sins. He knows what he is saying, and there is a meaning in his language, call it figurative if you like, that no other language could express so well. Test his language. Take a sinner, I do not say the worst you can find, and assume that he is not dead to the gospel, the beautiful holy truth. "I will teach him," you say, "what is good. I will teach him the love of God. I will instruct him in the high and holy principles of religion, the religion of Jesus. I will teach him to love his enemies, to do good to those who hate and hurt him, to sacrifice himself for other's good, to be like Jesus. I will inspire him with a deep hatred of all that is evil, and educate him into sympathy and community of feeling with the holy ones around the throne."

And that is about what a man should be taught, and he ought to be able to learn those noble lessons of the right life. But does he learn them? Can he learn them? Can he be taught by mere teaching to be a christian? No; he cannot. There is something wanting. It is not intelligence. It is not good sense nor good judgment. It is not memory nor reason. It is a lack of interest, heart, life. He is as dead to the truth as it is in Jesus, and to a life of faith and love, and as incapable of being influenced and moved by christian influences, as a dead man; and you will not go far in teaching him till you come to feel, that he must have something done for him that you cannot do for him.

You have a dear child, let us suppose, and your ambition as a christian parent is to train up that child to the beautiful of the christian life. You instruct your child in Bible truth. You teach him sound christian teaching. You indoctrinate him in the religion of Jesus. You restrain his wilfulness and waywardness. You watch against the buddings of evil, and you check them, and do your utmost to eradicate them. But right there before your eyes, and in spite of all your efforts to the contrary, he grows up selfish, ungrateful, unprincipled,

unholy, unchristian, so different from what you want him to be; and you wake up to find, that there are some lessons you cannot teach him, and that he cannot be taught as he is. In his natural state there is a side of him that is dead to the higher truths of religion, and that side cannot somehow be made anything of. But there is hope in God for him, and let us look there for what we cannot do. He is rich in mercy. He loves us and ours. He loves our dead. He wants to give them the life of His love. Let us ask Him then to do it, and let us expect Him to do it, and He will do it.

Then the third step in the gospel reform is the raising up, the resurrection. "And hath raised us up together."

Yonder at Bethany is a group around the tomb of Lazarus. When it is proposed to open the tomb, the objection is made that it will be useless, worse than useless. Death is there, and corruption. Nothing can be done now. Why open the tomb, and disturb the dead man's bones?

And there are those who still say of the dead in our churches and society: "It is no use. Nothing can be done for them. They are dead, spiritually rotten. Let them alone."

But the living Jesus is yonder at Lazarus' grave, and He ordered the stone to be rolled away, the dead man's tomb to be opened up. He knows that something can be done even for dead men—He can do something for them. Placing Himself at the very mouth of the sepulcher, with the fumes of corruption coming up around Him, He cries aloud: "Lazarus, come forth!"

How the sisters and weeping friends must have looked, when they heard those quickening words of the Life! But will the dead brother come forth? Hark! there is something moving down in the darkness and death of the tomb. Yes, there is the rustle of life, a sound like the waking up of a sleeper. Stand back! See, he comes up—al wrapped about with grave-clothes. Lazarus lives! he lives! He is raised up! Hallelujah!

And to-day the voice of Jesus is waking up the dead in sin, and they are coming forth from the graves where they have been buried, where their usefulness has been buried, where their souls have been rotting, where their noblest energies have been death bound, and they are being slowly raised up, higher, and still higher, into the blessed resurrection-life, the new life of faith and love and hope and joy, the gospel life, the christian life, the salvation life, the eternal life.

This raising up of dead souls is usually a slow process. It is going on in the world in our day extensively, but it is going on so quietly that there does not seem to be anything going on at all. Now and again a tear of penitence may be seen stealing down the sinner's cheek. Now and again a groan may be heard from him as the truth pierces and cuts into the quick. Now and again there is a trembling among the dry bones. Now and again a deeper interest may be seen among men with regard to spiritual things. Now and again there is a waking up of the people, and the question is on many lips, "what must I do to be saved?" But in general, God's work of grace is a deep quiet heart-work. It is something like His work in nature. When the great spring-resurrection takes place, when the fields put on their living green, when the woods leaf out, and when nature brings forth her spring beauties and summer glories and autumn riches, there are no tremendous convulsions, no tremblings and blazings of the mountains, no earth-quakes, no great movements, nothing to indicate that anything wonderful is going on. You cannot hear the grass growing, nor the flowers blooming. You cannot see the laboratory of nature at work, its mysterious processes going on. Watch as closely as you like, you do not seem to see anything that is worth seeing, and yet the results are so wonderful, grand, world-benefiting, man-blessing.

So with God's work of grace, the gospel's work. Society is being slowly transfigured; men are being saved; the people are being gradually lifted up; the world everywhere is being renovated, evangelized; its moral wildernesses are being turned into paradises; and yet, so quietly and slowly and steadily is the work going on, that there does not seem to be anything going on at all. By and by, however, men will wake up and find, that the spiritual spring has come, and all the world is ablaze with beauty, and rich with the promise of a glorious autumn of spiritual fruitfulness. The millennium will have come.

Oh this moral and spiritual raising up in Jesus that is going on among us, how blessed it is! But do we know anything about it? Has it taken hold of us? Sometimes the spring comes and goes;

Continued on fourth page.