

T H E

UNION PULPIT.

A COLLECTION OF SERMONS BY MINISTERS
OF DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS.

“In essentials, unity ; in non-essentials, liberty ; in all things, charity.”—*Augustine.*

FIRST EDITION.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

PUBLISHED BY WILLIAM T. SMITHSON,
FOR THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF WASHINGTON, D. C.

1860.



Entered according to Act of Congress, June, 1860,
By WILLIAM T. SMITHSON,
in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Columbia.

BUELL & BLANCHARD, PRINTERS.
C. W. MURRAY, STEREOTYPHER.
STEREOTYPED BY BLANCHARD'S NEW PROCESS.



B. Murray

THE CHURCH THE PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH.

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That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.—1 *Timothy*, iii, 15.

The history of Timothy is one of deep interest. Although a native of Lystra, and the son of a Greek father, he was piously and prayerfully trained, from his youth, by his mother and grandmother, who were pious Jewish women. Under the preaching of Paul, he became a convert to Christianity—entered the ministry—and became a noted Evangelist. Although of feeble constitution, his gifts were eminent, and he was a “faithful fellow-worker” with Paul, who loved him as a son, and who calls him his “dear son in the faith.” After performing many services, he was left by Paul at Ephesus, for the purpose of organizing and instructing the converts to the faith in that city, for which duty he possessed a great fitness. Yet, he was comparatively young, and was not possessed of that breadth of experience which was needful to meet all the cases that might arise; and, hence, the first and second letters to him of his father in the faith, which form so rich a legacy to the ministry and to the church, in which he instructs, directs, and exhorts him, as to the right performance of his duties as an Evangelist. The apostle felt that his return to Ephesus might not be as soon as he desired; and he wrote to him, that, if detained, he might “know how to behave himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

And our object in the present discourse is to illustrate a few of

the truths embraced in this comprehensive, but often misinterpreted, passage of Scripture.

I. OUR TEXT SPEAKS OF THE CHURCH.

“Which is the church of the living God.” Definite and scriptural ideas on the constitution of the church of Christ would have prevented many of the evils that have attended its progress, and would now extinguish much of that narrow and sectarian bigotry which so often arrays those in opposition to one another, who are looking to the same Saviour for salvation.

There is a common and almost universally recognised distinction, which divides the church into the visible, and the invisible. Among the Jews, the visible church was composed of all the descendants of Abraham—the invisible, only of those who truly loved the Lord. So, in these Christian times, the visible church is composed of all who profess the true religion, and their children; and the invisible, of those who truly believe in Christ, and have been moulded into His image. As the grains of gold are hid amid the baser earths—as the grains of wheat are hid amid the chaff—so the true people of God are hid among those who make an external profession of His name. And whilst the external organization and profession are requisite, yet is it true that “neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith that worketh by love.”

From this general statement it must be quite obvious that those who profess the true religion are not separated from the visible church by any peculiarity which they may adopt. Though different branches of the church may take unto themselves distinctive names descriptive of their peculiarities, they are not, therefore, separated from the visible body of believers. Though the Jews were divided into different tribes, having distinctive names and localities, they were all the tribes of Israel. Though the race to which we belong is divided into tribes, and kindreds, and tongues, all possessing peculiar customs and habits, yet all these kindreds and tongues belong to the human family. And so the various denominations of men who profess the true religion, although differing in many things from one another, form component parts of the visible church. And those are wholesale schismatics who claim to be the entire visible church, and who admit to connection with it only those who submit to their claims, whether put forth on papal, prelatical, or sacramental grounds.

Equally plain is it, that all those belong to the invisible church,

who, in heart and life, are conformed to the will of God. It is not the badge we wear, nor the name by which we are called, nor the way in which we administer or submit to ordinances, nor the church authority to which we yield obedience, but the image of Christ stamped upon the soul, that gives us a name and a place among those who are the people of God upon earth, and who will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. So that the church visible is composed of all who profess the true religion, and their children; and the church invisible, of all who truly possess it. Let any individual, rejecting these views, go out in search of the church, and, like the visionary in pursuit of the philosopher's stone, he is in search of an object he will never find, and will in all probability take up with something which has the least possible claim to it. It is the way of God, with those who reject the simple truth, to give them up to strong delusion to believe a lie. When men reject the truth, they soon become fiery zealots for a fiction.

II. THIS CHURCH IS THE HOUSE OF GOD.

“That thou mayest know how to behave thyself in the house of God.” The tabernacle in the wilderness, and, after it was taken down, the temple, was called the house or the habitation of God, because there the symbol of the divine presence resided. And whilst under our dispensation no material building is called the house of God, yet the language is applied in figure to the church of God, as we have just explained it: believers in Christ, joined together for His worship according to the forms of the Gospel. Of this the following passage is the proof and illustration, in which Paul thus addresses himself to the converts from the Gentiles: “Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone, in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord, in whom ye are also builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” (Ephesians, ii, 20, 21.) The material temple at Jerusalem was a type of the spiritual church; and as that rose from its elevated foundations laid on the rock, stone after stone, and plank after plank, to its completeness and magnificent perfection, so the spiritual church rises, by the continued conversion of sinners, and the progressive sanctification of believers, and is growing up unto an holy temple in the Lord. And every believer, like the stones and

timbers of a building, conduces to the growth, the stability, and the proportions, of the house. The wall must not say to the roof, nor the roof to the wall, I have no need of thee. The polished corner-stone must not say to the lesser stones that are hidden in the foundations, or in the centre of walls, "I have no need of thee." Each is needful to the stability and the perfection of the whole. All are fitly framed together; and the building is rising to its glorious completion by the additions making to it of every believer. This house of God is rising from age to age, and will only be completed in glory.

III. THIS HOUSE IS THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD.

"Which is the church of the living God." Here, it may be, the church of the living God is placed in significant contrast with the dead idols of the heathen. Timothy was in Ephesus, where was the magnificent temple of Diana, and where was the miraculous image which all the world worshipped. There stood the image in its magnificent abode, without life, sense, or motion; dead as the wood, or the stone, from which it was made; and without any power of imparting any benefit to its world of worshippers. It saw not their sins—it heard not the cries of their pagan revelry—the fermenting corruption of their hearts, it knew not; and whatever chastisement they deserved, it had no hand to inflict them. The image was polished, and beautiful, but it was dead. And the idols and gods of the heathen are all dead. And the living God, whose centre is everywhere, and His circumference nowhere, stands out in the broadest contrast with these. Having life in Himself, He is uncreated, but He is the fountain of life to all beings. He gives life, and breath, and all things, to His creatures. It is in Him we live, and move, and have our being. As the living God, He is everywhere present, and sends out the pulsations of life to the most remote fibres of His own infinite creation. And especially, as the God of grace, is He the author of eternal life to all who believe. The temple of Solomon was constructed of dead stones and timbers; and so was the temple of Diana, and all the temples of heathenism. But "the house of God," "the church of the living God," is built up of living stones, and living timbers. God's spiritual house is constructed of those whom He has made spiritually alive. He is the living God—and the materials of His house are all alive unto Him. He enters His house, not like a pagan or papal priest parading his embroideries and vest-

ments amid lifeless walls, and beams, and pillars, and paintings, and statuary; but like a father coming among his own living children, loving and embracing all, and loved and embraced of all. He comes, the living God, into a living temple, to impart new life to all who compose it, that they may be co-workers with Him to extend spiritual life throughout our world, which is dead in trespasses and sins.

The heathen serve dumb idols, but ours is the living God. He sees our faults—He marks our sins—He hears our complaints—He knows our hearts. But He is our Father—He has for us a father's heart. And His church, from its foundations, up, up, to the topmost stone, should be alive unto Him. Thus may His church be alive unto Him!

IV. THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD IS THE PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH.

The words which we render "pillar and ground" are nearly identical in meaning; or they may be interpreted so as simply to give intensity to the word pillar—as a very strong pillar, an unfailing pillar—a pillar that cannot be moved, so strong are its foundations, and so strongly is it built.

We will not weary you with detail as to the interpretations given to the word "pillar," and as to the variety of opinions as to what it refers. Because Timothy was left in Ephesus to preach, defend, and support the truth, some would make him the pillar. Whilst, in a high sense, he was a pillar, as is every true minister of the Word, yet, were Timothy now living, he would promptly decline the honor which these interpreters would confer upon him. Others would make God the pillar; but whilst He is the pillar and ground of the universe, a true interpretation forbids this. Others would make "the mystery of Godliness," in the subsequent verse, the pillar; but this would require a new arrangement of the entire passage. We believe the true meaning to be, that which lies on the very face of the text, that the church, not the church of Rome, not the church of England, not the church of Scotland, not any particular church, but the church of the living God, made up of all the true churches of Christ throughout our world, is the pillar and ground of the truth; and that glorious church is here brought out in contrast with the temple of the lifeless image of Diana, which was the pillar and the support of falsehood, idolatry, and vice.

In the porch of the temple of Solomon were two magnificent pil-

lars, between which the worshippers entered into the splendid interior. The one was called Jachin, the other; Boaz; and it is said that upon these pillars the prophets hung up all their prophecies, written upon parchment, that they might be read by all who entered the temple to worship. May it not be to this the apostle alludes in our text? And if so, how beautifully it illustrates the way and manner in which the church is the pillar and ground of the truth! It is to hold up the truth of God, to be known and read of all men!

The temples of the heathen were splendid structures, as is proved by those of them which yet remain, and by the ruins of others. Who can even now wander amid their ruins without being awe-struck with their magnitude and beauty, ere they were crushed by the ruthless hand of barbarism! These temples were crowded with pillars supporting their ample roof, some of which are models in architecture to the present day! Upon these pillars the laws and edicts of kings, and emperors, and governments, were hung, to be read by the people! And when the people desired to know the laws and edicts to which their attention and obedience were required, they resorted to the pillars in the temples which held them up for their perusal. May it not be to this the apostle alludes in our text? And if so, how beautifully it illustrates the way and manner in which the church is the pillar and ground of the truth! It is to hold forth the truth of God, to be read and known of all men! And we are confident, as to the essential truth, that here we have the mind of the Spirit in our text. The church, not the church papal, not the church protestant, nor any branch or segment of either, but the church catholic, composed of all who profess the true religion, is the pillar and ground of the truth.

Let this be accepted, and then, in view of the illustrations just given, there are some weighty truths that follow.

1. *The pillar neither makes nor modifies the laws.* These are enacted by supreme authority, and were hung on the pillars to be read by the people. So the church has no right to make new laws, or to modify those already given by God. The law of the Lord is perfect, and it must be preserved from all additions or subtractions; and the one simple duty of the church is to hold forth the laws of the King of Zion, in their purity, to be known and read of all men! If this principle is surrendered, our religious liberty is gone—for religious liberty consists in refusing to submit to any authority but

that of God—in refusing to receive, as of divine authority, anything not plainly taught in the Bible. Would that all contrivers and lovers of novelties, who are acting on the supposition that the law of the Lord is not perfect, might remember this!

2. *The pillar gives no efficacy to the laws.* It cannot make men read them, nor believe them, nor obey them. It holds them up, and then men disobey them at their peril. So the church gives no efficacy to the truth; that is the work of the Spirit; and all pretension to such power must go into the category of old wives' fables. We regard it not merely as pretentious and deceptive, but as blasphemous. The simple mission of the church is—and it is a glorious mission—to hold up the truth, and the whole truth. The power which gives it efficacy is from God. The church has to prophecy to the dry bones, and then to pray, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

3. *Nor can the pillar suppress the laws of the King, and put up others in their place, as more conducive to the good of the subject.* This would be virtually calling into question the authority of the King, and dethroning Him; as the power which repeals, modifies, or enacts the laws, is the supreme power. And this is the crying, horrible sin of Rome, and which subjects it to the curse of anathema, maranatha. It hides the truth from the people, and teaches them, for doctrines, the commandments of men. It puts up a pillar of its own, and, putting aside the revelation of God, it covers that pillar with its own teachings; many of which it is as difficult to comprehend as the hieroglyphics of Egypt, and when understood they are contemptibly frivolous, and only deserving a place with the bones of St. Quietus.

4. *The truth which the pillar is to hold up for universal perusal is not any formulary of doctrine of human contrivance.* These are very well in their place; and we favor creeds and confessions because they embody the great truths which the different branches of the church receive as the teachings of the Scripture. Nor have we ever known any violently opposed to them, but the propagators of error, to whose success they opposed strong barriers. Yet it is not these symbols, but the revelations of the Spirit by prophets and apostles, as contained in the Bible, which the church is to hold forth. Symbols are nothing, but as they are based upon the revelations of God; they are worse than nothing, when they either oppose, pervert, or

obscure them. And by preserving the Scriptures in their integrity—by preserving their doctrines and institutions from corruption—by transmitting them from age to age in their original purity—by truthful translations of them into the tongues of all people—by her efforts to send the Bible, and the ministers of God to preach it, to all the tribes and kindreds of the earth—the church of the living God has shown and is now showing itself to be the pillar and ground of the truth.

These are all weighty truths, and of the highest importance to the being of the church, and to the well being of the race. The highest temporal and spiritual interests of man are interwoven with the perfect purity, and the entire freedom, and the universal circulation, of the truth of God.

Now, the application of all this is important and obvious.

1. *It settles the questions as to what is the church, and where is the church.* In its visible form, it is composed of those who profess the true faith—in its invisible, of all those truly collected unto Christ. Nor is it confined to the domains of popery, prelacy, or presbytery; it is composed of all who receive and practice the truth. The most obscure believer on earth is a part of it—and wherever a family, or a body of faithful men, are assembled for the worship of God, there it is in form, and in spirit, and in reality. The individual in whom the Spirit dwells is a temple of God; and there may be a church in the family, as well as in the city, or in the state. These are the true answers as to, What is the church? And where is the church? In no other way have the questions been ever answered, worthy the regard of an intelligent mind.

2. *It defines the simple duty of the church.* That duty is to hold forth and to hold up the simple truth as it is in Jesus, to be known and read of all men. Behold those pillars in the temple at Jerusalem, covered with parchments containing the Will of God, as revealed to the prophets, and daily surrounded by multitudes of anxious readers! There is symbolized the duty of the entire church. It is to hold forth and to hold up the Word of life! Oh that the heart of the church, and of its entire ministry, might be impressed with this great truth, so that we may cease from sectarian strife, and from questions that tend to no profit, and from modes of reform which only aggravate the evils they mean to remedy, and cause the conflicting passions of men to swell and foam like the waves of the sea

in a storm; and that we may turn our entire energies to the spreading of the knowledge of the truth to the ends of the earth. Let the dead bury the dead, but the one duty of the ministry is to preach the Gospel. God's truth is the great rectifier of all error and of all evils. This alone purifies the heart. All other reformations are but partial and apparent, like the skin drawn over the cancerous sore, whilst its fiery roots are spreading within. Ephraim must cease vexing Judah, and Judah Ephraim, about questions as to the mint, anise, and cummin; and both must give themselves to the holding forth the Word of life to all people.

And what is the duty of the church in the aggregate, is the duty of every member of it. If the church may be compared to a temple, then may its every member be compared to a pillar in that temple. Some of these stand in the porch, some around the altars, some in very obscure corners; but the duty of them all is to hold up and to hold forth the Word of truth. Think not that this noblest work is confined to the pulpit. It is the device of hell to divide the church into castes, and to authorize only the few to preach Christ crucified, and to forbid others to tell those perishing around them of the way of life. The Sabbath-school teacher—the obscure mother, with her children grouped around her, and with her Bible on her knee—the friend who deals faithfully with the soul of his friend—the young men banded together for works of benevolence and mercy—these, no less than the minister, are co-workers with God, are holding forth the Word of life. You may be poor and obscure, and hold no rank in the church; but may not a private in the army fight as valiantly for his country as the officer that commands? May he not die fighting for the colors which he may not carry? If it is not his business to train recruits, he may enlist them. And to this work of enlisting recruits for the Cross, the Gospel calls all who are looking to the Cross for salvation. “The Spirit and the bride say come; and let him that heareth say come, and let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.” The Master hath need of the active service of all His people. Multitudes, even in our most highly-favored places, are dying in their sins; and though every minister were as a flaming fire, and every preacher a Whitefield, they could not overtake the great work before them. And no person should be considered as converted, unless so converted as to take a living, loving interest in the conversion of

others. The great, grand, glorious duty of the church, and of its every member, from the minister to the most obscure member, is to hold forth the Word of life. When the church and its entire membership shall be thus the pillar and ground of the truth, the morn of the millennial day has already risen upon our world; and the shout will be soon heard rising from earth to heaven, and echoed back again from the heavens to earth, hallelujah, salvation, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.