

THE INDEBTEDNESS OF MODERN CIVILIZATION TO
THE BIBLE.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SUSSEX COUNTY (N. J.) BIBLE SOCIETY,

AT ITS ANNUAL MEETING IN NEWTON,

June 8th, 1864.

BY THE

REV. JAMES C. MOFFAT, D. D.,

PROFESSOR IN PRINCETON SEMINARY.

PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY.

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P. A. W.
July 20, 1921

DISCOURSE.

"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."—PSALM cxix. 105.

IN the Holy Scriptures, counsels of infallible wisdom have been provided for every condition in the life of man. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to estimate how much the world has been unconsciously benefited by the Bible. It is a lamp unto the feet of the righteous, but some of its light is also enjoyed by all who walk in his company. Its ways extend far over the path on which he treads. The counsels of Holy Scripture have been found as practically useful for the present life as they are safe in guiding to the life to come.

That the Bible is the text-book of all the true religion that exists in the world, is a proposition which needs no defence in this place. It is already beyond all reasonable question. But vast as the ground, and inestimable as the interests which it covers, it is still far from covering all the indebtedness of the world to the Bible.

The civilization of modern times, in its best and characteristic features, is also a gift from the same benign source. The Word of God has been a light to our path, without which the present age could not have stood where it does in the advance of refinement; and, by the better use of which, higher attainments might have been made, and in following which, I feel assured that mankind is yet to enjoy a greater degree of prosperity and happiness.

Superiority, in this respect, might be predicated of an age in view of the wide diffusion of the elements of culture among the people, or of the polish attained by its privileged classes. The latter was the case of ancient heathen civilization; the former that of the Hebrews in their best days, and of the modern or Protestant world.

The aim of civilization is to qualify man properly to meet the demands of his true relations to God, to his fellow-men, and to nature. And the elements which go to make it up are, accordingly, religion, government, and society, and the circle of the arts and sciences.

In all ages, the world has been indebted for its best instruction, more or less directly to revelation; but since the rise of Protestantism, and the free publication of the Bible, that indebtedness has been more fully declared and consistent. The highest civilization of the present time is the outgrowth of a free Gospel. And although men of the present day are necessarily the only judges in the case, yet so plain and conspicuous are the points of eminence, that there can be no chance of error in giving decision in favor of its great superiority. How far that is due to the infusion of the spirit of Christian doctrine is, I suppose, not fully apprehended by Christians themselves, and will, of course, be denied, in the main, by men of worldly mind. To present the subject in detail would demand the capacity of a volume. On the present occasion, I propose to indicate the fact merely by reference to the leading principle in each of the constituent elements.

1. In the first place, I remark that the religion of the present civilized world, though various in form, is all, in its fundamentals, of Scriptural origin; and that which belongs most properly to the time is entirely so. Protestantism, though not the religion of the greatest number of modern nations, is, indisputably, that of the most completely civilized. And Protestantism answers the highest purposes of religion better than any

other—because it brings its believer nearest to God. It obtrudes no mythological veil, no idolatrous medium of canonized saint or sculptured stone, between the worshipper and God; but brings him immediately into His presence, as a child to his father. It also gives the most elevating and worthy views of God. It presents in Jesus both a model of every virtue, and a sufficient Saviour, offering in him alone every thing to give the believer peace of conscience, and a sense of inexpressible dignity in union through him with God. It is at once purifying, elevating, refining, regulative of the affections, and liberalizing of the whole man. As the religious element in civilization, it is the best for the purpose. And it is, of all religions, that which adheres most closely to the teachings of Scripture.

Although both Greek and Roman Christianity have their place within the pale of civilization, it is, beyond dispute, Protestant Christianity that takes the lead, and dictates the fashion of the present time. Germany, France, England, and North America are, beyond dispute, at the head of the movement—all, except France, countries in which the Protestant principle has taken the deepest root: and France is the most Protestant of all Romish countries, and would have been thoroughly Protestant in life and profession but for the enormities of bad government.

To religion belongs also education, which, in modern times, has been carried to a degree of excellence, beyond what is recorded of it in any previous period of the world's history.

It is marked by great care in elementary training. In this respect, perhaps, not superior to that of noble families in classical times; but now it is thrown open to all, without distinction of wealth or rank, furnished gratuitously, and, in its best estate, having a higher end in view than heathen education ever had.

In the Sabbath School, now so extensively ramified, and comprehensive of all classes, the modern world enjoys a means

for good, which is more directly civilizing than any other work which education has ever before undertaken. It goes to beautify, both morally and materially, confers the most attractive charm upon the homes of Christian comfort and affluence, and goes with its benign mission into the humblest abodes of the poor.

And when we look to the more advanced part of a liberal education, we find it carried to a length in pursuit of the most valuable objects of knowledge, which was never practicable until after the Reformation, as well as to branches of science which have grown up since that time.

Thus, education, both improved and made more common, has lifted up the general intelligence and tone of society—effects distinctly due to the Bible, freely published, with its wealth of instruction, its precepts inculcating the duty of acquiring knowledge, and its beautiful literature, quickening the mind therefor. And, in this connection, it may be well to repeat, what has often been remarked by others, that the Bible, notwithstanding the hostility it encounters, is more largely published, more extensively and thoughtfully read and commented on, more frequently and popularly explained, and more practically addressed to the lives and consciences of men, than any other book.

2. The sciences are the results of man's inquiries, the classified sum of his definite knowledge; the arts, his application of that knowledge to effect his own ends. Both, in order to the execution of their proper work, must labor with a view to their own proper aims. Fine art must have beauty for its aim, and no other; industrial art, convenience or comfort; and science must have truth for its object, from which if it departs, it ceases to be science. But both truth and beauty are of God; and success in the pursuit of both is best secured by a spirit in harmony with the Word of God; for His Word is truth, and the Psalmist sings of Zion as the perfection of beauty, and

of seeking Zion to behold the beauty of the Lord, as well as to inquire in His temple.

Science has made greater progress since the Gospel obtained freedom, than ever before in all the history of the world ; and art has secured, if not truer beauty, certainly a vastly wider range of it ; and never before did either of them enter so deeply into the common life of man.

The effect of natural and mechanical philosophy, and their offspring in industrial art, is to assert and establish the dominion of man over brute and inanimate nature. In this respect, the Protestant world is, beyond dispute, elevated on a higher throne of dominion than human society ever secured before. They are the Protestant—that is, the Bible-reading—nations, who take the lead in the control of nature, and of natural laws, for the use of man. The steam-engine, the steamboat, the railroad, the electro-magnetic telegraph, gas-light, and hundreds of mechanical inventions, for the convenience and comfort of society, are the offspring of Protestant genius. The mind is quickened, enlightened, and directed to the apprehension of truth, and to its use for human well-being, by familiarity with the Bible ; and where the Bible is free, and popularly read, there man rises most effectively towards the position, originally designed for him, of dominion over the creatures.

In that department of science which treats of man himself, in his spiritual and intellectual nature, whatever advance has been made beyond the attainments of earlier times is still more directly the fruit of Bible instruction.

The arts, like the sciences, as already intimated, are of two classes : one pertaining to man's use of natural things for his comfort and convenience, and the other for the gratification of his taste. In the best development of society, the former must reach maturity first. Only of recent years has Protestant fine art begun to assume its distinctive features ; but already has it declared itself, as at once broader and more minute, more varied

and yet truer to nature, and carrying its efforts into a greater number of fields than the art of any previous time. Never did art, with such docility, follow God in His works, as in that state of society which is most directly controlled by God through His Word. It is the promise and beginning of a style of art greater than the world has previously seen.

In that most influential of all the arts, namely, literature, the Bible itself holds the very highest place. Containing the most ancient of extant books, it reaches through all periods of the best of antiquity; presenting in the most attractive forms, ever devised by human genius, the treasures of revelation. It brings the best moral results of ancient refinement, and pours them, through its own agency and the channels of modern literature, into the culture of the present day. It has always taken its place in the languages of the purest existing civilization. When Hebrew occupied that position, the Scriptures were written in Hebrew; when that honor passed over to the Greek, the Scriptures assumed the language of the Greek; when the Roman governed the civilized world, they took up the authoritative speech of Rome; and when the modern languages of Europe rose to the dignity of literature, among their earliest books were translations of the Bible. It has also been the means of introducing letters into many barbarous nations, and thereby of greatly improving their condition. The British and Foreign Bible Society, within the first fifty years of its existence, printed and published the Scriptures in one hundred and fifty different languages, some of which had never been reduced to writing before; and "thus," in the words of one of the historians of that institution, "the minds of multitudes have become enlightened and elevated, filled with correct ideas of the earth and time, of good and evil, of God and eternity. They have risen to the true dignity of their rational nature; they have been fitted to take their proper station among the nations of the civilized world, as well as to inherit the kingdom of heaven."

3. Under the head of society, I comprehend the principles, manners, and customs regarded by men in their intercourse with one another, and public opinion. In this sphere, although the erroneous and often iniquitous practices of heathenism have not entirely departed, yet, in those circles most characteristic of the present age, the principles of kindness and forbearance, and preferring one another in honor, are admitted as the marks of polished society. And the manners of such society are shaped accordingly.

The modern lady and gentleman are kind and gentle in manner, carefully polished from every asperity which can hurt or offend the feelings of others; and if also affectionate and warm-hearted, the more nearly do they approach to what modern society holds to be the perfection of that type. But these are features which are exhibited in their finest form in Jesus of Nazareth; and in His teaching is the doctrine of goodwill to men most distinctly held forth.

The haughty, overbearing spirit, quick to take offence, and prone to give it, exacting of deference to itself, and thoughtless of what is due to others, belongs to an inferior style of culture—a lower grade of civilization: and that in exactly the degree in which it fails of conformity to the Gospel. One, whose courtesies are only superficial, is generally felt to be a cold, repulsive person, for the very reason that a hypocrite is such. One of imperfect polish, but in whom real kindness of heart appears, is more in conformity with the spirit of the best society. But the whole argument is summed up in the general admission that the utmost excellence of that kind is designated by the term—"a Christian gentleman."

4. True civilization implies government by law, the protection of the feeble against the strong, the suppression of violence and the dominion of equal law, whereby the life and property of the weak and of the strong are equally safe. Barbarism is the dominion of violence, the rule of the strong over the weak.

Wherever society admits the principle that a man's own arm is to be his defense, his individual strength the means of asserting his rights among his fellow-men, there the seeds of barbarism are already planted; and if carried out in practice, all that civil order, which modern times hold in most esteem, will soon disappear.

The doctrine of modern civilization, on this point, is to leave vengeance to the law, and to look to the law for the protection of all its subjects alike. But just laws receive their authority, directly or indirectly, from God; and only just laws can long sustain themselves in such a state of society. And thus we are brought to the Bible doctrine, that vengeance belongeth to the Lord, and that it is God who alone has the right to be revered and obeyed as sovereign in all the earth.

The fundamental law has been expressed in the most cogent, as well as in its purest form, in the Gospel, where we are taught not to return evil for evil, but by all means to promote the government of love, which is the fulfilling of the law of God.

Men are not competent to sustain absolutely any form of government—the freest are under moral constraints. A tyrannic rule is one which pays no respect to the moral demands of the governed, and must suffer change or overthrow when those demands become clear and universal. A people, when free, will not maintain a government which, in any important respect, contradicts the popular judgment of truth and righteousness. Such an one may be set up by a party, but will certainly fall as soon as the moral character of the people has time for practical expression.

In brief, every nation is controlled by an insistent, moral constraint, to seek that kind of government which shall correspond to the best they know of the will of God; and short of that they will never rest satisfied. *Good* government is virtually of God.

Accordingly, in all Christian countries of the present day,

we find such changes irrepressibly taking place, as to bring their respective civil constitutions into conformity with the Christian knowledge existing in the public mind. The despotic are being modified or removed, the limited monarchies further limited, and the liberal purified.

That all this is a process due to the publication of Divine truth, is evinced, both directly and indirectly, not more by its self-demonstration than by the kind of opposition made to it. All corrupt systems have attempted to withhold from their subjects the use of the Bible, either by forbidding them to be instructed in reading, or by excluding the book from their dominions. But the power against which they contend is too strong for them. Already has it asserted its victory at the highest seats of authority, and is rapidly pushing its conquests onward over remaining opposition. Government, in the present civilized world, is satisfactory only in as far as it corresponds to what its subjects know of the principles of the Gospel.

Another feature of the best modern culture is the progressive ripening of a well-regulated freedom. Ancient republicanism was the freedom of a few, and the bondage of the many. The canker-worm at the root of all the so-called free states of antiquity was the slavery in which the majority of their people were held. It was thereby that the ruin of every one of them, which has left a history, was effected. Oppression of the industrial classes degrades work. Work made disreputable, industry flags, and enterprise dies in embryo. Old routine, if let alone, may conceal the progress of decay for a time; but the shock of invasion or of revolution, when it comes, can never be repaired. The national vitality is not strong enough to recover, and death supervenes. A Philip or a Caesar finds an easy victory when the mass of the people have no interest in defending the Constitution. It is the moral of both Roman and Hellenic history. Modern freedom is very different. It contemplates a state of

national existence, in which all shall be born free and equal, and estimates man not as belonging to a class, but as a man, and according to his gifts and virtues.

Although this doctrine has been most distinctly pronounced in the United States, the spirit of it enters, more or less, into all the civilization of modern times, and deepest into that which is furthest advanced. It appears, in the progress, slow, but onward, of the British constitution, in the effects which have been secured from the revolutions in France, in the liberation of Russian serfs, and in the general diffusion of republican doctrines and sentiment throughout Europe.

Now, this is a progress which has followed the march of the Gospel, and of the Gospel alone. And it flourishes best where the Gospel is most commonly read and most popularly acted on. It springs from the doctrine and practice of the Saviour, whose teaching, as the truth of God, alone qualifies men to be free indeed.

When the Son of God left His throne on high, it was not to assume the splendors of a throne upon earth. He went down at once to the condition of the lowliest, and chose His birth among the humblest poor. For thirty years He lived obscurely among the poor; and to the poor, in an eminent degree, were all His ministerial labors addressed. It was a peculiar glory of His Gospel that it was preached to the poor; and His miraculous power was extended, most frequently, to heal the ailments and supply the wants of the poor. From birth to death, He labored to lift up the poor, and to put them on a social level with each other, and with the wealthy among His followers. And, in all succeeding time, the effect of true Christianity upon society has been to liberate and equalize. Beneath its genial rays, the slavery which belonged to the Roman system of industry gradually melted away. With subsequent corruptions, new forms of slavery crept in. But again, since the Reformation, the Gospel, by its own agency once more set free, is

going on to dissolve the effects of that return to heathen degradation.

The oppressors of the poor—those especially who would hold them in perpetual bondage—are distinctly the opponents of the Gospel, and, to all that extent, contradict the teaching of Christ and the labor of His life. Christ taught to elevate the poor; they would crush the poor into hopeless degradation. Christ teaches the means of making all His followers equal, as brethren, in Him. These men determine that nothing shall make them equal. Christ would remove the gulf between the rich and the poor, and render them mutually helpful, in fraternal affection, to one another. But these men contradict Him, and say: “Nay, widen the space between the rich and the poor. Put the poor into a different grade of mankind. Deny them every right that man can take from his fellow-man. Deny that they are men—that they are human beings. Reduce them, as far as they can be reduced, to the condition of brutes, and use them as such.”

There can be no flatter contradiction of Christ’s spirit towards men, of His doctrine touching their relations to one another, and of the deportment of His life among them, than the practice of slavery, and, accordingly, nothing can be more inconsistent with the interests of civilization.

The Gospel is the enemy of all slavery, alike in conscience and in life; and slavery is its enemy. In the conflict between them, especially for the last three hundred years, the Gospel has been progressively gaining the advantage, and has accumulated its victories until the present day, when its march is of unprecedented rapidity. Slavery, on the other hand, is as rapidly passing away. It no longer exists in Germany, in France, or in England, or their colonies. It has been recently abolished throughout the empire of Russia. Among the secondary powers of Christian Europe, Spain alone retains it, not within her own borders, but in some of her dependencies.

It has been abolished in the most prosperous and populous States of this country. In the whole breadth of Christendom it retains no important foothold, save in Brazil, some dependencies of Spain, and in the Southern States of the North American Union. In Brazil, measures are being devised for its removal, and in this country it is falling to pieces from the recklessness of its own iniquity. Slavery, like a mass of rock detached from the brow of a mountain, is tumbling headlong; and as it rolls downward with accelerating velocity, descends most rapidly just before it is to be shattered to fragments at the bottom.

Greatly to be pitied are good men who from constraint or prejudice have joined the defenders of slavery. They toil and suffer in a barbarous and disreputable cause, and one which is doomed to be more disreputable still. However it may be judged by local estimates, the losing side is theirs.

The onward progress of the Gospel must eventually sweep all their defenses away. Temporary success has been conceded to them, and we do not know that the long-suffering of God with their cause is yet exhausted; but that they will fail ignominiously in the end, is as certain as that the kingdom of Messiah will triumph gloriously. The whole voice of the civilization of the time repudiates their cause. For our civilization, as far as it differs from the ancient, springs out of the teaching of Christ, with many defects it is true, and failing to recognize its own origin; but yet, in all its peculiar excellences, indebted to the advancing Kingdom of Heaven, as the morning twilight is indebted to the sun.

In view of the progress of our civilization, and in determining what it shall further be, it is not for us to go back to any example of heathen date, or even of such as flourished under the Mosaic, or any other ancient dispensation of God's grace: for those belong to the past. Our civilization, notwithstanding the blemishes still clinging to it, is, as to all that is peculiar in

it, that which springs from a free Gospel; and our source of instruction, for its further development in propriety and purity, is not so much the example of Greece, nor the legislation of Rome, although both are useful, as the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

These points, otherwise demonstrable, are confirmed by the indisputable fact that the increase and improvement of the elements of human culture have been greatly advanced since the establishment of societies for the publication of the Scriptures, and especially within the last sixty years,—the period which has elapsed since the beginning of that most important of all efforts of the kind—the British and Foreign Bible Society.

I remark in closing that—

1. Reformers of social and political evils greatly err when, as they sometimes do, upon finding the Bible apparently in their way, they cast it off, and attempt to make their way without it. They greatly err. Because the Gospel, being the root of the matter, no change, contradictory of the Gospel, can be vitally incorporated with genuine improvement. And if the change proposed is really a reform, it will be found in accordance with the Gospel, and a great advantage is lost by rejecting its support. The Gospel is the proper test of every proposed change, as to whether it is a reform which will harmonize with the progress of modern civilization.

2. The highest refinement of our time is not limited to persons of wealth or aristocratic birth, but is equally accessible to all. It is of a nature to be universal. The poor man who diligently studies the Bible, and seeks conformity to its precepts, and the example of Christ, is farther advanced in the best culture of the time than the wealthy or noble-born who neglect it.

3. Another benign effect to the same end is that which consists in harmony of purpose and union of Christian feeling.

When the British and Foreign Bible Society was formed, ministers of the Church of England, Dissenters, and foreign Christians, for the first time, met in harmonious co-operation for effecting one common religious purpose. And since then, Christians of almost every name, not excepting Greeks, Romanists, and Orientals, occasionally have taken part in its councils and labors. Men who could unite in no other religious enterprise have been united in the bonds of a common interest in the Word of God. And having thereby discovered their affinity in Christ, they retain each other's respect and love. Romanists, in turning against that cause, have thereby denied themselves to the broadest platform of Christian fellowship. Docile pupils of the Bible, whenever they come to a mutual understanding, are brethren. The cause of true and lasting union is also the cause of Divine truth; and its triumph will be most complete when the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord.

4. And, finally, whether it is our purpose to send civilization where it is not, or to improve it where it is, the best and only effectual means is the publication of the Bible, and the inculcation of its doctrines into human life. The most effective agency for the culture of human nature in this life is that which goes to prepare it for the life to come.