

Spiritual Ignorance and Woman's Position

"*IF any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.*" These words will seem harsh to many, but they are Paul's words, and like all the words of Paul, whether harsh or gentle, they bring with them a lesson for the wise which makes it worth while to consider them.

They were uttered by Paul in reference to a class of critics who set themselves up as judges and censors of Paul's course, without being competent to fulfil their self-imposed function; being, in fact, pious hypocrites, perhaps without knowing it. These critics considered themselves to be spiritual: wherefore he says, "*If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant*" (1 Cor. 14: 38). This challenge was doubtless humiliating to those concerned. Paul was willing to allow the possibility of their being prophets and spiritual men, but made their recognition of his teachings a test of the point. If they recoiled from the test, saying, "We don't know," he then charged them with ignorance, and called on them to accept their place as ignorant men, and not pretend to be what they were not. The picture before us is that of men in Paul's day professing attainments in the truth, but ventilating doubts as to Paul's authority, under a concert of superior discernment, which was only a cloak of ignorance. By one trenchant sentence Paul was able to tear the thin gauze from their faces, and reveal the pale, ghastly, green countenances of envious hypocrites, who made a profession of subjection to the truth, but were all the while spiritual cyphers, uncertain about the great realities of the spirit, and only faintly appreciative of even its palpable glories, being chiefly distinguished by a care of their own precious little dignities and reputations, which suffered eclipse from the orb of Paul's vigour and faithfulness.

There is such a thing as the whole counsel of God (Acts 20: 27); a faithful work of the Lord (Titus 1: 9-14); an earnest contention for the faith (Jude 3); a full, wise, uncorrupted, saving testimony of the truth (1 Tim. 4: 15, 16). And there are those who never get farther than a mere smattering of the thing; whose capacities are too contracted to expand to the greatness of the truth—whose energies are too much bestowed on mere temporalities to leave a sufficiency for growth in the spirit, and stop short in pious "charitable" uncertainties, which embarrass the operations of the truth, and would spoil the work of God if they were to get their way. They are dealt with in Paul's words: "*If any man think himself a brother, let him show it by acknowledging frankly and abetting heartily the whole counsel of God; but if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.*" If he is uncertain in this or that, and disposed to temporize and compromise, let him take his place as an ignorant man, whose voice should not be heard in counsel, and least of all, lifted up against those who are where he professes to be, and who are doing the work, which, by his profession, he ought to be doing with all his heart.

We have not a Paul to cut the matter short in this summary way, though if we had, we should probably have the same fight to fight, considering how they flourished and obtained the ascendancy in Paul's day. We have, however, the word of God, and good sense to apply its most glorious facts and principles; and with a little timely firmness we may cut our way through the tangle-weed that would obstruct the progress of the boat, and, by the merciful permission of God, land in the desired haven.

It is altogether a mistake to let ignorance or pusillanimity dictate the policy of the truth at any time, but more particularly in an age when the truth has to contend with almost

insurmountable difficulties. If any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant; but let not those who are privileged to be otherwise, take direction or example from the ignorant man, nor let their course be influenced by him, either for the sake of pleasing him, or from any other motive. His way leads to destruction and death; and all the more so, because he wears the garb and talks the language of one who knows the way of life. "He thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual:" if he be so, let him show it by manly, earnest, zealous carriage of such a one. But if he be but a spiritual ignoramus, let him take the consequences in being avoided.

This is the lesson of Paul's harsh words. Nor is it inconsistent with those other words with which, no doubt, the "charitable" man of ignorance would run to the rescue: "*We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of them that are weak, and not to please ourselves*" (Rom. 15: 1). It is a well known popular proverb that "the devil can quote Scripture." The charitable man of ignorance, quoting these words for such a purpose, is an example of it. Nothing is more grievous to sound sense than to hear cogent words misapplied. How easy it is to do so, while all the while appearing to be arguing most justly. The apparent justness of it is the measure of its mischievousness and aggravation. Thus the hypocritical libertine justifies his flagitious ways by quoting Paul: "*All things are lawful unto me.*" Thus, too, the Papists extenuate the claims, practices, and pretences of the Roman priesthood, by quoting Leviticus, and the words of Christ to the apostles: "*Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted.*" And thus charitable and mischief-working ignorance would plead for connivance at error and sin by quoting "*We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak.*"

The sense of words must always be taken from their connection. Paul was speaking of brethren all alike believing and obedient to the Gospel of their salvation. Some, however, had a weakness in relation to meats and drinks, inherited from the law which had only just ended in Christ. Paul says that strong brethren were not to reject such brethren, or ridicule their weakness, but rather bear with them, and be careful to do and say nothing that would place a stumbling-block in their way. The "strong" and "weak" brethren of the passage were both "*in the faith.*" The "*bearing*" Paul recommends had no reference to the doctrines and precepts of that faith, but to certain things lying outside of it. He did not mean that brethren faithful to the doctrines and commandments of Christ were to "*bear*" with those who were loose and uncertain in their allegiance to these. On the contrary, you find in the same epistle, in the very next chapter (16: 17), that he commands them to "*avoid*" those who "*caused divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which they had learned.*" He meant that strong and faithful brethren were to bear with weak faithful brethren in matters not affecting the faith and practice which united them in Christ.

The lesson is serviceable in our own day, in both ways of it. There are matters which do not affect the principles or precepts of the Gospel in which a magnanimous forbearance will be exercised by all right-minded brethren towards those who may not have sufficient vigour of judgment to see their way clearly. On the other hand, there are principles and practices with which there is to be no forbearance whatever. If a man should object to almsgiving, for instance, it would be a violation of Paul's words to say that because "*we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak,*" therefore, those desiring to be obedient are to give in to this man's scruples, and suppress among themselves obedience to the second great commandment. Suppose he were to find fault with baptism as a needless preliminary to fellowship, as an obstacle keeping back many people; or suppose he were to complain of the Gospel being preached as essential to salvation; or suppose he were to find fault with prayer, or to object to praise in the assemblies of the saints, instead of being called on to bear with such, as "weak" brethren, in the sense of giving in to their ignorant whims, the faithful would

rather be under an obligation to apply the principle before us in the words: "*If any man thinketh himself to be a brother, let him show it by consenting to the wholesome words of the Lord Jesus; but if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.*" And if any man be so ignorant as to stand in the way of the principles or practices of the house of God, which is the pillar and ground of the truth, he brings himself within the stern injunction of John, which commands us to refuse our "*God speed*" to any who bring not the doctrine of Christ; and Paul's command to "*reject*" a man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition.

Forbearance and faithfulness must never part company. Wisdom teaches when to forbear and when to earn the Lord's commendation of the Ephesian ecclesia: "*Thou canst not bear them that are evil.*" And this wisdom comes from above, through its appointed medium, to those who search diligently for it, as for hid treasure in the daily reading of the word.

Besides the duty of avoiding those who ought to be avoided, there is another lesson in the 16th chapter of Romans, which comes as a counteraction to the ideas that some have drawn from Paul's remarks elsewhere on the position of woman in the ecclesia. Paul has said "*Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.*" There is a tendency with some to drive this doctrine to an extreme. I have heard some speak contemptuously of the sisters as "mere women, only fit to nurse babies, and look after the pudding." Against such a doctrine every true brother will earnestly protest. It is not only degrading to her whom God has given us for "*an helpmeet,*" but it is inconsistent with the spirit of the Gospel which teaches that there is neither male nor female in Christ: that we are ***all one in Christ Jesus***. It is probably the natural extreme of the theory which flourishes on the other side of the water, and is equally to be reprobated in Christ. The one puts woman too high, and the other most certainly too low—so low as only tyrannical and selfish men would put them. Paul's allusions in the chapter referred to, help us to put the right boundary to Paul's doctrine of feminine subjection in the other case.

He commends to the attention of the Roman ecclesia one Phoebe, a sister, whom he distinguishes as "*a servant of the church at Cenchrea.*" This implies a prominent, active, if not official position on the part of the sister in question. He further distinguishes her by making her the bearer of the epistle to the Romans, of which, for a time, she was the sole custodian. He entreats the whole Roman ecclesia on her behalf, saying of her that "*she hath been a succourer of many, and of me also.*" In the next verse he mentions another sister—Priscilla, as one who had, with her husband, for Paul's life laid down her own neck. In verse 6 he sends love to "*Mary, who bestowed much labour on him.*" Further down, he salutes, among others, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Julia and the sister of Nereus, and the mother of Rufus. This is a standing apostolic recognition of the high place which sisters may fill in the Lord, if, in the grace of God, they have wisdom sufficient. True, there are not many such, but that is a misfortune of our times, and not a necessity of the thing itself. It may account for the cynical views of some, but ought not to be allowed to justify an unnatural, mischievous, and unscriptural theory. Sisters are never likely to develop into noble servants of Christ if the door is shut in their face, by a theory which would consign them to cradles, pots and pans. I do not mean to suggest that cradles and pans are incompatible with higher duties any more than the hammers, shoe lasts, or baking troughs of their rougher brethren, but a doctrine which would tie them all the time to these, is an offence and a mischief.

It is the part of true nobility to shine in the performance of the humblest duties, we will not say "stoop," or "condescend," because there is no stooping in the case. These humble

duties, which are most important in the economy of life, become exalted in the hands of intelligence and worth. But to insist on confining sisters to these, would be to ignore the fact that they have brains as well as bodies; and that men have other needs of help-meetship besides those of knife and fork. Such a boorish doctrine would destroy companionship, where brethren need it most, and unfit their wives to fulfil the highest function of motherhood, which is to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In fact, it is a doctrine to be opposed and detested as much as any hurtful doctrine may be. The man who holds, and much more the man who preaches it, deserves to be deprived of every social advantage, and to be shut up in a cave. This, in fact, is his destiny at last.

Jesus marks the position of woman in a very distinct manner, and on more than one occasion. He rebuked Martha for her zeal in the very department where our ogre friends think women ought exclusively to shine. He commended Mary for her preference for spiritual things and spiritual society. To "*the women*" he first appeared after his resurrection, and sent his first message to the disciples through then shortly before he suffered, one showed the exuberance of her affection by anointing him with expensive ointment. A certain brother standing by (John 12: 4), who probably thought women were "only fit to look after babies and puddings," said: "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?" It was a hypocritical plea, for the speaker, who "*bare the bag*," was a thief, and sold his Master for thirty pieces of silver. Hypocrites always oppose the deeds of righteousness under pious pretences. How did Jesus receive his very proper, very prudent, very judicious protest against such useless "extravagance"? He said, "*Let her alone: why trouble ye the woman: she hath wrought a good work upon me. . . . Verily, I say unto you, wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this that this woman hath done be told for a memorial of her*" (John 12: 5; Matt. 26: 13). And wheresoever during the past eighteen centuries these apostolic records have been read, this incident has been made mention of to the credit of a woman—a sister—a beloved Mary, who very likely put all her spare money into the act.

If a sister is an intelligent, active, useful, noble servant of Christ, her being a woman is no disqualification or barrier; it only precludes her from the act of public speaking, and involves subjection to her husband. It does not shut her up to babies, pots, and pans, though these will dutifully receive the right share of attention at her hands. She is a partner, a helper, a fellow-heir in all things pertaining to Christ, and the man who would degrade her from this position is not fit for a place in the body of Christ.

But, of course, there are trying women, women of no sense, or perhaps a little sense with a clattering tongue—just sense enough to comprehend the trifles—smart in a small way, with large relish and capacity for the small things of life. They may even talk about "*the truth*" in the glib fashion in which they talk about Mrs. Jones. Such women are not sisters, though they may bear the name. Such women may covet the respect shown to real sisters; they cannot get it. They may envy the appreciation and love exhibited towards true Marys, but they can no more get what they wish than a farmer can reap harvest who does not sow in spring. They may steal a little by surprise, but stolen goods have to be given up with bitterness. Insipid, petty, gossiping, garrulous, spiteful women are amongst the most grievous nuisances of creation. The great superabundance of them has probably led to cynical extremes against their sex; but it does not exclude the fact that there are noble daughters of the Lord God Almighty, nor does it justify the refusal of the right position to such when happily they make their appearance.

For both men and women, there is a place in the kingdom of God. Though they neither marry nor are given in marriage, we may depend upon it that God, who never makes mistakes, has a place in the higher state for the companionship arising out of the natural and radical differences between man and woman as constituted in this preliminary state. This is one of the sweet secrets we wait to see disclosed. Meanwhile, they stand related to the same rules of admission. Each must be faithful to Christ in their several spheres. The man must be enlightened, believing, courageous, trustful, prayerful, and obedient; and the woman must be no less in her more contracted circle, aiming particularly at those active, repeated, and untiring good works in the Lord which obtained for sisters of old the approbation of the Lord and the praise of his apostles. Thus may both earn for themselves a good degree which will shine forth with glorious lustre in the blessed ages that are to succeed the present evil world.

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, pages 92-97 by Bro. Robert Roberts)