

SIGNS AND TRADITIONS

It is profitable to remember that the basis of our meeting this morning, and of all the meetings we hold, and the basis of our hope concerning the future, is the work of the apostles in the first century. Keeping this distinctly in view, we are able to judge our position scripturally and to conform it to the right model in points where it may lack. As an ecclesia, or assembly of the called, we are acceptable to God through Christ, only in so far as we are what Paul laboured to make the ecclesias in his day.

He gives clear expression to his aim in this matter in the words found in 2 Cor. 11:2: "I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy, for I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you a chaste virgin to Christ."

Let us try to imagine ourselves members of the community to which Paul addressed these words, and it will help us to realize our true position as brethren and sisters of the Lord Jesus. There was no drying Euphrates in those days; there was no Eastern Question engaging the universal thoughts of men, and stirring actively the hopes of those looking for Christ. The hope of Christ's appearing was before the minds of the brethren, but not as a matter of imminent expectation. Paul told them plainly, in writing to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:2), that that day would not come until the development and manifestation of the man of sin power, symbolized by the little horn of Daniel's fourth beast. They had therefore none of the excitements that belong to the hope of Christ's speedy appearing. Their position was one of fidelity to Christ, based upon deeper and more lasting considerations.

The question we must address to ourselves is—Do we participate in their standing in this respect? Is our position one of "repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ," without reference to the sensationalism of public events? It is to be feared that in some cases, at all events, the true answer would not be a satisfactory one. The nature of the times we live in exposes men more or less to the liability of being absorbed in the signs of the times from a merely political point of view, to the sacrifice of the real and lasting claims of the truth on their affections. There are, doubtless, cases in which the withdrawal of the political aspect of latter-day expectations, connected with Christ's appearing, would leave the mind destitute of all interest in the purpose of God. It is for us seriously to examine ourselves on this point. Mere prophetic politicianism would be no qualification for association with Christ in the day of his appearing. The preparation of the bride for union with her Lord, consists of something much higher than acquaintance with the political symptoms of his approach. This acquaintance is, of course, a characteristic of true disciples living in our period of the world's history; but it is outside the essence of true discipleship. True discipleship existed vigorously in the days of the apostles, when as yet the signs of the times in some of their details, had not been revealed. It is to this class of discipleship that we must conform, if the advent of Christ is to be of any advantage to us. This discipleship, while greatly interested in the signs of the times, is independent of them for its existence. Its life is drawn from sources deep and lasting as the universe itself. It depends not for its warmth and activity upon the transient phases of God's political work among the sinners of the earth. The basis of its vitality and its love is broad as the whole work of God, from the day that Adam left the garden in sorrow. It is substantial and deep as the history of Israel spread over the centuries to our own day. It is lively and real, as the power and wisdom of the God of Israel. And true and permanent as the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only abiding fact in human history, though men see him not yet.

There is a present life in true discipleship which contrasts strikingly with the state of mind which lives only on the sensations of expectation. We see the features of this life reflected in all the writings of Paul and David by the spirit. God is an every-day fact in such a life. To thank Him and praise Him and trust Him, are its every-day exercises and luxuries. Christ is a reality in such a life, as the priest who ever liveth to make intercession for us, and who is able to save to the uttermost all those who come unto God by him. His mastership is recognised every moment, and wisdom sought in doing his commandments. Joy is experienced in the contemplation of his excellence, and sobriety and purification acquired in the realization of his holiness. Prayer and meditation in solitude, are the natural reliefs of a life based on these foundations, and the benefit of others in temporal ministration, and the work of the truth its congenial expression. All pleasure following, and politician-mongering are alike foreign to its vital bent. It finds adequate sphere in the jog-trot monotony of every-day life, enduring as seeing him who is invisible, and “choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.”

The signs of the times, to a mind modelled thus after the image of the new man in Christ, afford gratification, but do not supply motive. The motive exists independently of them. It is drawn from the fact of God’s proprietorship of all things, and His purpose disclosed in the gospel, to glorify His name on the earth and abolish all curse by Christ. Indications of the near approach of the fulfillment of this purpose, are reviving and stimulating to those who are the subjects of this motive; but they are not essential to its life or continuance. Abraham and all the prophets walked acceptably before God under its power, while seeing the day afar off; consequently, their true children are everywhere characterised by a patient and warmhearted continuance in well doing, without respect to the tokens in the political sky.

In our conceptions of well-doing we must beware of being guided by popular standards, whether in religious or secular circles. Polite society embodies the mind of the flesh in its precepts and practices, and religious society, where it is to be found, is, as a rule, but the organic manifestation of superstition, originating in the long established apostacy from apostolic principles, which occurred in the first century. We must draw our inspiration from one source only. There is no safety outside the oracles of God. The well-doing that is acceptable to God, consists of the doing of those things He has required, and we cannot in our age learn what these things are otherwise than by the study of the book where they are recorded. We cannot learn them from the common talk and the current thoughts of society. Men have long since gone away from the Bible in this matter. In fact the world at large never have at any time received and practised Scripture principles. The beginning of things was barbarism, and the present situation of things is but the adaptation of barbarism to the new circumstances created by the state adoption of a form of Christianity. Some Bible principles are to be found in contemporary recognition; but these are only such as are common, more or less, to all forms of civilization. Not to steal and not to lie, are maxims which even the Pagans delighted to honour. True Bible principles, go much higher and deeper than the so-called morality of popular discourse. They are scattered thickly all over the surface of Bible composition, and many of them are such as the most cultivated morality of the natural mind cannot receive. The keeping of the commandments of God, because they are His commandments, is a rule of action out of the reach of the natural man: yet it is the simplest rule in the household of God—one of the first of first principles. There is no safety for any of us apart from the adoption and practice of this simple principle.

There is however, one peculiar danger which has to be guarded against in the matter. It is illustrated in what has been read this morning from the words of Christ to Israel after the flesh.

He told them they had made void the commandments of God through their tradition. He makes his meaning plain by giving an illustration. Moses had enjoined the reverence and support of father and mother. To this the Jewish Rabbis had not a word of objection. They boasted in the law, and therefore in all parts of the law. They did not dare to say parents were not to be honoured and maintained by their children. Nevertheless they took the pith out of the precept by adding to it a notion of their own on the subject. They taught that a man by a large gift to the Temple, might redeem himself from the obligation to maintain his parents, and thus they made void the commandment through their tradition.

This is the danger to which we in another form are exposed. Jesus has said “Ye are my friends if ye keep my commandments,” and he gives us to understand that by these commandments he means those delivered by his apostles as well as those spoken by himself. Now there is not much danger of our objecting to any of the commandments of Christ in a direct and formal way. We may, as the Scribes and Pharisees did with Moses, make a boast of Christ and our submission to him; at the same time like them we may make void the commandments we confess by the traditions we invent. This is not an imaginary supposition. Christ has forbidden us to resist evil, or recover again the goods that may be taken away from us.—(Luke 6:30.) To this the traditionists do not object directly; but they say, duty to society requires the prosecution of the thief. The application of this doctrine makes it impossible that there can ever come a time for Christ’s commandment to be obeyed. Consequently, it is a tradition making void his commandment. Christ has commanded the relief of all need that may come under our notice, and the Samaritan-like interesting of ourselves in the distress of those who have no claim on us. The traditionists say, “very good, a noble precept;” but in practice they hold that it is encouraging pauperism to entertain the cry of the needy, and that “every place should maintain its own poor.” Consequently, when the opportunities arise for obeying the commandments of Christ, their tradition comes in to make it void, and they shut up the bowels of their compassion, and shutting their ear to the cry of the poor, depart to their inglorious comfort; forgetting to fear the time that will come, when it may be said to them “Thou in thy lifetime hadst thy good things, and thy brother his evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.” Again, Christ has forbidden the encouragement of friendship with the world, and declared the impossibility of retaining the friendship of God and the friendship of the world at the same time. The traditionist who loves the present world, comes in with a tradition to the effect that too much isolation of society narrows a man’s opportunities of serving the truth, and that if the world can see that we are good fellows, they will be more likely to listen to what we have to say for Christ. The obedience of this tradition draws a man into association with the lovers of pleasure, and a participation in their pursuits, with the result of a friendship which takes away all meaning from the words of Christ, making void his commandment.

Illustrations might be multiplied, but these must suffice on the present occasion. No form of disobedience is so dangerous as that which is proposed under the plea of doing good. It is an old doctrine, “Let us do evil that good may come.” Paul himself had to oppose it in his day, and his verdict on its advocates is vigorous and unmistakeable: “whose damnation is just” Such apologists for disobedience are far more dangerous than those who oppose Christ out and out; for they may beguile the unwary to their destruction. A knowledge of Christ, and a profession of subjection to him will be of no ultimate value to us, if it turn out that through the power of our traditions we are living in daily disobedience of his commandments.

The course of obedience may be trying to the flesh and blood. It is intended to be so. No test of our faith could be more complete or beneficial than the command to do things contrary to our

natural inclinations, and which there is no reason for doing but the simple one that they are commanded: but if the trial is heavy, the prize of victory is beyond our power to estimate. And our trial is only short at the longest. It will soon be over, even if we live the full age of man. A human life time is not even a tick on the clock of eternity, and when past, it is past never to return. Well therefore may we accept whatever portion of the suffering of Christ comes to us through the obedience of his commandments. Well may we say with him, “the cup which my Father has given me to drink, shall I not drink it?” If we suffer with him we shall reign. Our light affliction which is but for a moment, worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

(Seasons of Comfort Volume 1 pages 189-192 by Bro. Roberts)