

UNPROFITABLE QUESTIONS

1 TIMOTHY 1. —Paul writes to Timothy, and we see something for our profit. The letter is sent to Ephesus (where Paul had left Timothy), after the effective labours in that city ten years before. Those labours, it will be recollected, so widely affected the community as to stop a trade in silver shrines, which had beforetime flourished, causing, in consequence, a great stir among "the trade," and a public uproar, in which several of the brethren suffered violence. The influence was not confined to the city of Ephesus: "all they who dwelt in Asia," we are told, "heard the Word of the Lord Jesus," consequent on Paul's labours in Ephesus, "by the space of two years," and "mightily grew the word of God, and prevailed; and many that believed came and confessed, and showed their deeds, and brought their books together, and burnt them before all men." Believers were not only numerous, but influential. We find "certain of the chief of Asia," described as Paul's friends, during the uproar before referred to (Acts 19:31). The testimony for the truth had affected the higher circles of society, and laid hold of the educated and devout-minded among Jews and Gentiles, unlike its experience in our day, when it can operate on the fringes of society merely. The circumstances of the case admitted of such a result.

To the Jews Paul had access, as a Jew, in the synagogues, which were open to all; and he was enabled to arrest Gentile attention by means which are not at the disposal of nineteenth century labourers. "God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul" (Acts 19:11). The consequence was the formation of a large ecclesia in Ephesus composed of the better sort, whose well-working was a natural cause of anxiety to him. Paul was with them two years, at the end of which he left them for other parts to see them no more again, except the elders, for whom he sent from Miletus, on a subsequent occasion, when passing. When he departed, he left Timothy behind him. His object in doing so is stated by himself in the chapter read. It was that he (Timothy) might "charge some that they teach no other (than the right) doctrine." This indicates the existence of a perverting class of brethren in the Ephesian ecclesia, whose evil influence had been perceived by Paul, while still among them, and the tendency of whose exhortations and expositions he says was to "minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith."

Herein we have a hint for our guidance, in a day when Paul no longer lives to give us a father's counsel. There are "questions" whose agitation is hurtful, because they are doubtful in themselves and unimportant in their bearings when solved, while the agitation of them interferes with the spiritual result called "godly edifying." The attainment and preservation of "godly edifying" is the great object of the truth, and will be the cue of every true brother's policy. What is this? It is building-up in godliness—a strengthening of the mind in the things pertaining to God. What are these? The hope He has given to us; the obedience He requires of us in the many things commanded; the faith He would have us repose in Him; the love He seeks at our hands towards Himself and our "neighbours"; and the intercourse He desires us to hold with Him in prayer. These, of course, are founded on knowledge of who He is, what He has promised, and what He has done and said, and the commandments He has given by His servants the prophets and the apostles, and of His Son, Jesus Christ. Knowledge of these made effective in the spiritual results for which it was given is the essence of godly edifying. Whatever imparts this knowledge and strengthens the determination to abide in godliness, in all reality of sentiment and action, helps the process of "godly edifying": whatever distracts the attention from these, or weakens resolution in relation to them, is to be avoided as a profitless and positively hurtful strife of words. There is need for applying this principle.

There is danger of men's using these "points" and "questions" involved in the truth to the frustration of the whole object of the truth itself, and this not, perhaps, from evil intent, but from certain peculiarities of mental constitution which impel to the discussion of matters best let alone, because in their nature insoluble in the special way they are presented for discussion, or unreducible to a form that will embody the general thought. Against this tendency we must be on our guard. If Paul stationed Timothy at Ephesus to neutralize the influence of "some" who were troublers, we need not wonder if nineteenth century experience should disclose a similar necessity (though, unfortunately, the necessity cannot be supplied as it then was). The class will not, necessarily, present the same features. It differs with the circumstances in which it exists. In Paul's day, there were Talmudical and Pagan legends on which to expend their pertinacity and ingenuity, as to the question of their credibility; also questions of pedigree, which, in those days were something thought of; also significances of the law, about which they vainly jangled, understanding neither what they said nor whereof they affirmed, turning aside in the process from that charity out of a pure heart, and a good conscience and faith unfeigned, which Paul declares to be the end of the whole matter.

In our day, by a different process, the same class reach the same wretched result of withering their own souls and that of their neighbours, as in a furnace of burning heat, and destroying the healthy and joyous vitality that comes from the pureness and fullness of the blessed hope; which teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, and righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for the Lord from heaven to change our vile bodies, and to set up the kingdom of God. Questions as to the day when the Lord was glorified; the state of his blood when he entered the divine presence whether Moses is living or dead; the meaning of certain types in the law the relation of death to the millennial population; the quality of wine used at the breaking of bread, and the bread itself; the precise value of the sacrifice from a divine point of view; the relation of God's foreknowledge to free agency, etc., etc., etc., etc., are all matters that may be the casual topic of conversation or even the subject of earnest thought, but which are misplaced when seriously debated, as matters affecting the standing of such as believe and obey the Lord Jesus; and placed out of the category of usefulness if treated with the incessant zeal of a hobbyist. The crowning glories of the truth shine with the brilliancy of the mid-day sun; and it indicates a strange obfuscation of mind when men neglect its noonday brightness, to burrow in the caverns of doubtful questions with the dark lanterns of speculation. It looks like a case of loving darkness rather than light.

Timothy was to concentrate the attention of the believers on the practical purposes of the law, about which some were disposed to jangle in an abstract and theoretical way. He was to teach them that the law was not for righteous men, but for the lawless and disobedient, the ungodly and sinners, unholy and profane, whoremongers, stealers, liars, perjured persons, and anything else contrary to sound doctrine, ACCORDING TO THE GLORIOUS GOSPEL; whence arises the reflection that sound doctrine, according to Paul's use of that phrase, is comprehensive of correct teaching in matters of duty or morals, as much as in those elementary matters known as "the things concerning the kingdom." It is of the first importance to observe this. The "glorious gospel" comprehends a call to repent from dead works. Paul puts this among first principles (Heb. 6:1), a place which reason would assign it; for of what value are the purposes of God to a man apart from the righteousness and benevolence in which they have their foundation?

Where men have not learnt the nature of "dead works," and the imperative duty of turning from them; they have not perfectly learnt the "glorious Gospel," however lucid may be their apprehension of the nature of man and the nature and purposes of God. The first lesson connected with baptism is that the subjects of it, having been buried with Christ, become dead to sin, and rise to newness of life. It is much to be feared that in the discussion of abstractions, for which the human intellect is not fitted, the practical object of the hope in purifying the believer from "all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord," is lost sight of, or, at all events, not realized in practice. That it is so in many cases is unquestionable, which calls for fear. The unpurified zealot, who compasses sea and land to make a proselyte; the mere theorist who is glib in the phrases of the spirit, but in practice unsubject to the law of Christ, is a bastard, and not a son. It will not be a wonder, if in our day, just emerged from all pervading darkness, there be many such. Let all examine themselves. The day of examination is at hand, when character, exposed to view in the electric brightness of the Spirit's standard, may shine with a different hue from that in which it appears in these dusky and scarce-illuminated shades of death. The Pharisees outwardly appeared righteous unto men, and thought themselves righteous, for they thanked God they were not as other men; yet, behold the Lord's verdict, which is, doubtless, applicable in many modern instances. Doing things to be seen of men is a practice not yet extinct.

Timothy's part in Ephesus seems to have been successfully performed, if we are to judge by the message the ecclesia received from the Lord Jesus, through John in Patmos, about 35 years afterwards. "I know thy works, and thy labour and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them that are evil (these were the 'some' referred to by Paul): and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted." The career of the ecclesia during all these years had thus been a satisfactory one, as regarded their repudiation of the "some" who sought to entangle them in irrelevant and profitless controversies about the law and other things; and, as regards their perseverance in the course required by their profession, as the servants of Christ. In this we have an example. We are surrounded by pretenders, and apostolic pretenders, too. By the word we have found them liars, and have, consequently, come out from among them. From them that are evil, we are also to withdraw, "hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." If these things were commended in the Ephesian ecclesia, the commendation was written that believers, in all subsequent ages, might go and do likewise; for is it not added, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches"? Consequently, so far as our case may answer to that of Ephesus in these particulars, we may take comfort.

But there is another feature in the case of Ephesus to be noted, which brings warning with it. It is this: "Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." This is an intimation that the good thing commended in the early career of this ecclesia had ceased to be characteristic of it. It is not that as a matter of sentiment their enthusiasm had cooled with the progress of time and trial, which is natural enough; but that the fruits -- the "works" that spring from faith -- had abated from a weariness in well-doing against which Paul had warned the believers. That this is what is meant is evident from the counsel with which the reproof is associated. "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works." They had stopped doing the first works, which was "leaving their first love."

"Love" and "works" are synonymous in the vocabulary of the Spirit. A sentimental love, unaccompanied by obedience, is not accepted. "This is the love of God," says John,

"that we keep his commandments" (1 John 5:1), which is equivalent to the declaration of Christ, "Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14). The Ephesian believers had slackened in their obedience. In this they had left their first love. Herein is our warning. If an ecclesia under apostolic superintendence could so far degenerate from the apostolic standard of conformity to the law of Christ, what may not our danger be who have no living apostle to recall us to our duty? Against this danger there is only one secure defence, and that is, holding daily interviews with the Spirit in the reading of "what it saith" in its appointed channels of utterance, the writings of the holy men of old who were moved by it. By this, as Peter intended in the writing of his epistles (2 Pet. 1:15; 3:1, 2), we shall be enabled to have "these things always in remembrance." Giving thus an earnest heed to the things we have heard, we shall not let them slip (Heb. 2:1). Continuing in prayer without ceasing, we shall be built up in our most holy faith, and strengthened to that continual abounding in the work of the Lord, which shall secure for us at the coming of the Lord the commendation he bestowed on the ecclesia at Ephesus, without its accompanying rebuke of evil men.

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, pages 120-124 by Bro. Roberts)