**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**22. RIVAL PATHS TO PERFECTION by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Are ye so foolish? having begun in the spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh?"*

*Galatians 3:3*

What is before the Apostle's mind as he writes these words is the conversion of the Galatians and their religious relapse. Once they had been pagans, worshipping gods that were no gods with a merely ritual service - in bondage to "weak and beggarly elements," which whatever else it means, means enslaved by some sort of religious materialism. Suddenly Paul appeared among them with his Gospel. He held up Christ on His cross: "placarded" Him, as he says in this chapter, before their eyes. He held Him up in the character described in his very first sentence, as one "who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from this present evil world." The sight of Christ crucified arrested them as it has arrested innumerable hearts since. They were fascinated by it; for the time they were spell bound. Christ entered into their souls in the power of His passion; He lived in them, and they died to their old selves and lived in Him. Old things passed away, and all things became new. This is the beginning, and if we only understood, it is also the middle and the end of Christianity. Nothing has any right to a place in it but Christ, the Christ who died for us, and the reactions of the soul under His influence. Christ crucified and the soul's response to Him are the whole of the true Christian religion. This is the experience which is meant in the New Testament by receiving the Spirit. The creeds teach us to believe in the Holy Spirit, but that is an expression foreign to the New Testament; the Spirit was not a belief, but an experience, of the early Christian. It was his first experience. He began in the Spirit. His new life started as an inspiration, an experience of uplifting, liberty, and power. Its predominant manifestations might be emotional, intellectual, or ethical, but its standing mark was originality. Where the Spirit of the Lord was there was liberty. The Spirit was subject to no law but that which was involved in its own nature; there was no motive for that which it dictated but the motives operating through Christ crucified. Everything statutory disappeared from religion. Christ was the end of law to those who came under His power. Religious materialism and religious routine were abolished.

But Paul was not the only preacher who appeared in Galatia. He had hardly left the country when others appeared in his track. They had a new "placard" to exhibit, and they were not afraid to raise it side by side with the Apostle's Christ crucified. It was a placard on which were engrossed the countless formal precepts of the Jewish law - its covenant badge of circumcision - its sacred calendar, with its days, and months, and seasons, and years - its distinctions of food into clean and unclean - its whole system of visible, statutory, outwardly imposed ordinances in which the religious life was to be embodied and expressed. Strange as it may seem, passing strange as it certainly seemed to the Apostle, this placard also had its fascination. It exerted a malignant spell over the Galatians which checked if it did not neutralize the beneficent spell of the cross. They actually thought they were making progress, reaching a higher stage of religion, when the gracious power of the cross which had worked their spiritual emancipation ceased to be felt; and when, instead of exulting in the liberty and responsibility which it had brought, they were scrupulous about rites and ceremonies, times and seasons, and in general about laws which were not inspired but imposed. The Apostle, who was their spiritual father, was alarmed and distressed. He could not understand such an unchristian relapse. This progress! he exclaims; this a step towards perfection! Can folly go so far? Having begun in the Spirit, with a great inward liberation, renewal, and reinforcement of life wrought by God through Christ crucified, can you imagine that you are carrying your Christian life to perfection when you abandon all this, and submit once more to statutory observances that only touch the outer life, or to put it a little scornfully, the flesh?

This is the situation which the verse presents to us, and we may generalize it in order to apply it to ourselves. Religion begins in inspiration, that is, in enthusiastic inner freedom begotten by Christ in the soul, and owning an absolute responsibility to Him, and to Him alone; but it is only too apt to belie its origin and its true nature, and instead of cherishing inspiration and liberty as the very breath of its life, to relapse into fixity, ceremonial and routine, and actually to glorify these as the authentic tokens of the Divine. Let us look at some illustrations of this.

**1.** The most conspicuous, perhaps, is to be found in the sphere of thought, A free-thinker is a name of evil import in the Christian Church, yet when we think of it, no men were ever so free in their thinking as those who wrote the New Testament. Whatever else the New Testament is, it is the most original book in the world. The mind of the Apostles was inconceivably stimulated by the impression made on it by Christ: I cannot think of anything which gives one so vivid a sense of intelligence working at high pressure, and seeing new worlds of truth open before it while it works, as some parts of the epistles. It is no exaggeration to say that Paul and John were the most daring free-thinkers who ever lived. They had no creed or catechism to follow: they do not quote anyone, hardly even Jesus Himself; they were not "sound" in any traditional sense, but original; they were not orthodox, but inspired. They reconstruct the whole world in thought for themselves, with Christ as its Alpha and Omega, its source, its centre, and its goal. Nobody had done this before, and no outward law imposed such thoughts upon them; they were thoughts freely produced from within by men who felt that they were both free and bound to think and speak as they did.

This liberty of mind, if we do not like to call it freedom of thought, is not inconsistent with a harmonious witness to Jesus, but it enables the Apostles to combine variety with unity, and to bring out different elements in the unsearchable riches of Christ. The fundamental unity of the apostolic religion is unquestionable: it is one and the same Christ who is Lord and Saviour to all who speak to us in the New Testament. But though Christ is the same in all, yet to Paul He is pre-dominantly the Christ who atones for sin and brings the gift of a Divine righteousness; to John, He is the Son who reveals the Father and communicates eternal life; to James, He is the Lawgiver and the Judge; to Peter, the Author of immortal hope; and in Hebrews, the great High Priest of humanity. These conceptions do not contradict, they supplement each other; but they rose in the minds of the Apostles only as they stood in the presence of Christ crucified, and let His influence tell upon them unchecked and untroubled by any authority from without. The wealth and the liberty go together. And it is the same when we think of the intellectual reconstruction of the world in the epistle to the Colossians. Only a mind which was absolutely free, and which experienced at the same time an irresistible compulsion in the revelation of God in Christ crucified, could have ventured to give a new interpretation of the universe in the light cast by the cross.

But though this intellectual freedom, which is illustrated on every page of the New Testament, is the proper attribute of Christian minds - the atmosphere in which they live and move and have their being - how many there are in the Church who seem to be fascinated by the very opposite. What they think indispensable, what they pride themselves upon, is not inspiration, not the stimulation of intelligence by the crucified Christ, but orthodoxy, soundness, fidelity to a formula in which the truth has once for all been embodied, and which is never to be subject to reflection or revision any more. They chain themselves to some form of sound words, and find in this a guarantee that they are in the ideal Christian position. They accept some creed as a law of faith, a statute imposed upon them by the authority of the Church, and everything turns for them on unwavering fidelity to this. But the Church of any given age is an assembly of fallible men; and no one who knows what it is to "begin in the Spirit" - no one who has experienced that deep-reaching, all-embracing emancipation which comes to the intelligence as to the moral nature when the power of Christ's passion descends into it - can ever identify a law of the Church simpliciter with the truth of God. It does not matter whether it issues from Nicaea or Augsburg, from Trent or Westminster. The mind that has been fascinated by Christ Himself, and that has begun to know what He is by its own experience of what He does, must never barter that original quickening and emancipation, and what it learns by them, for any doctrine defined by man. It is a false progress that is promoted by unbending conformity to creeds and confessions. The only way to become perfect is to cherish the initial liberating impulse, to keep our being open to the whole stimulus of Christ, to grow and still to grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. There is nothing statutory in the Christian life, and of all the regions of life the intellectual is that in which statute is most signally out of place.

**2.** Another instance of the working of the same principle is seen in the tendency to stereotype Christian experience, and to demand that in all natures it shall assume precisely the same forms. What is produced in the human soul when Christ crucified is placarded before it? Sometimes there is apparently a prevailing type of experience: in the great revival of the eighteenth century, for example, there was often an overpowering sense of sin, which was suddenly swallowed up in a great joy and peace in believing. Perhaps, indeed, such types are not so prevalent as at the time they seem to be; for during a revival there is a tendency for all who are affected to interpret their experience according to the established formula, and to exhibit it, so to speak, cast in a mould which may in some cases really be incongruous to it. But in any case we know that there are other types. The spell of Christ crucified may exert itself in other ways; it may exhibit its power in a new hungering and thirsting after righteousness, in a longing to see the sovereignty of the Lord realized in human society, in a strange new birth of love in the soul. Such new or divergent experiences are not to be distrusted: the one thing we have to distrust is fixity, the tying down of the cross to one particular mode of exercising its power. Theological books used to have a long section headed Ordosalutis, the way of salvation. It discussed in what was supposed to be the normal order such subjects as calling, illumination, conversion, repentance, faith, justification, regeneration, the mystical union, sanctification. It might seem the very region in which everything was sure to be real, because it rested on experience throughout; but often it was vitiated and made unreal just because it shrank from giving experience its due. Its wish and tendency was to reduce experience to one type: to show that everyone who was a real Christian must have had the proper experiences in the only proper order. But the wind bloweth where it listeth, and the freedom of the Spirit is not to be limited by any assumed way of salvation. In grace there is the infinite variety which living nature itself presents; and the way of perfection is not to reduce all genuine Christianity to what we think the true pattern, but to trust and recognize as genuinely Christian all experiences which men owe to Christ. It may easily be the one crucified Lord Who begets in some souls the passion of contrition and the joy of faith, and in others the passion of love for the sinful and wretched, and joy in working for the kingdom. The only thing to be trusted is experience, and we must take care not to distrust it on the ground that we have the measure of all true Christian experience already in our hands, and can now impose that measure as a law. We cannot. There is no such all-comprehending law known to us, and familiar or unfamiliar we must welcome everything that Christ inspires.

**3.** The same reflections are suggested, and we must let the same considerations weigh with us, in regard to Christian worship. Worship is a function of the Church, and in its worship, as in its thinking, the Church began "in the Spirit." Everything in its worship was original, and everyone might contribute to it as the Spirit impelled him. "When ye come together," Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "each one hath a psalm, hath a teaching, hath a revelation, hath a tongue, hath an interpretation". The Apostle does not blame this nor repress it; he only attempts to regulate it. He lays down the laws, which are themselves suggested by the Spirit, of edification and decorum. Nothing is to have a place in worship that does not build up the Church, or that is in itself unseemly. But short of this, worship is free; and the larger the number who contribute to it and the more original and independent their contributions are, the more perfect is the worship. Paul dreaded the imposition of restrictions. "Quench not the Spirit," he said, with this very danger in view. Do not pour cold water on your fervent brother when he makes his contribution to prayer or exhortation, even though you think the fire of his devotion a little smoky. It will burn itself clear, but it is poor policy to put it out.

The quenching of the Spirit in worship, however - the relapse in the Church's collective confession of God and testimony to Him from inspiration to routine - is the most constant feature of its history. It is one long story of what began in the Spirit trying to make itself perfect in the flesh. At a very early period modes of worship became fixed - perhaps, to begin with, modes of the celebration of the sacraments. Eventually, however, laws were made for every part of the Church service. The prayers to be said, the Psalms to be sung, the Scriptures to be read, were all fixed; often it was fixed by custom if not by law, that the preacher should preach from the Scripture that had been read. Nothing was left to inspiration at all. There was no point at which the Spirit could manifest itself even if it would. No one would say that there are no advantages in this. It is an advantage to be protected against arbitrariness and caprice. It is an advantage to have noble forms of worship, even if we have no more, and not to be at the mercy of people who possibly are not always inspired. It is more than an advantage, it is a necessity, to have some element of orderly habit in everything which is to last. But surely we should have said beforehand that no one could think that to be tied to such forms, unable to vary them or to do anything outside of them, was the way to perfection. Yet strange to say this is what many think, and there is nothing that shocks them more - nothing, as they would say, that is more offensive to their conscience as loyal church people - than the idea of modifying the use and wont of worship. How eloquent they can be about its accumulated as sociations, its sacred memories, its venerable authority. One Church is conscious of this in another, but not so readily in itself. Presbyterians are astounded and amused when they read in the life of a Tractarian bishop of Salisbury that he had such a reverence for the order established in the Church that he would not allow any deviation from it: would not use liberty, even when the law allowed it, as in choosing readings for harvest thanksgiving services, or in omitting the long exhortation in the Prayer Book at early communion; nay, as his biographer Canon Liddon tells us, "he would not allow his chaplains to follow the modern fashion of leaving off bands". But Presbyterians can see these things without looking beyond their own borders. Even those who are not old can remember what strange things have been said and done in the name of purity of worship, as if purity meant petrifaction. Men have objected to beginning public worship with prayer instead of with praise. They have objected to the use of hymns in public worship as if it were a sin now to sing a new song to the Lord. Certainly worship ought to be pure, but the only pure worship is worship in Spirit and in truth. The more it is inspired, the more certainly will we have new songs, new prayers, new testimonies, whenever the Church meets; the body of Christ will be built up in its worship by that which every joint supplies.

I do not think it can be questioned that the absence of this freedom in worship - or to use the Apostle's expression, the quenching of the Spirit, and the desire to attain under law and routine the perfection which can only be reached through inspiration - is an evil which is deeply felt and from which the Church is at present suffering severely. Few Church members realize what large numbers of people there are whose hearts have been touched and quickened by Christ crucified - who have responded to the appeal of His love - who have in short "begun in the Spirit" - but who are outside of the fellowship of the Churches because they could not enter without having the Spirit quenched. They associate with each other in meetings of their own, where they can impart to each other some spiritual gift; in the absence of forms they are far more like a New Testament Church than any of the organized denominations; and though they have often the draw backs of a defective education, they contain a great deal of the most vital and valuable Christianity of the country. The Churches have lost much, which, by abandoning their original freedom, have made it impossible for such Christians to remain within their borders. They ought to make room for them. A meeting in which there is a liberty of prayer and a liberty of prophesying - in which Christian devotion can be expressed, or Christian interests and duties discussed, by every member of the community - in which the free Spirit can have free course through those whom it has quickened to spiritual issues, is indispensable in the Church if it is to fulfil its ideal. It began and is always beginning anew in the Spirit, and it will never be made perfect in the flesh. It began and is always beginning anew in enthusiasm and liberty, and it will never be made perfect by routine.

**4.** The largest application which could be made of the text would be to Christian conduct in general. The perfect life, in the Christian sense, is that which is at every moment inspired - that in which statute is abolished and conventions have no more power. Nothing could be less like Christian perfection than what has sometimes been specially designated the perfect life, namely, a life controlled at every point by monastic rules. The obedience of the monk, who has given his will away to a system if not to a superior, is not the path to perfection; it is a kind of moral suicide. It has a real analogue outside of monasteries in the timid scrupulosity to which everything new is wrong, and in the stolid conscientiousness which without troubling itself about the opinions or the needs of others restricts itself to the observance of established conventions. We do not need to say or to think that the goodness of such people is of no value or serves no purpose. Perhaps it acts in the moral world as the mass of small investors does in the economic world: it maintains a sort of equilibrium; respectable people are not so easily disturbed and thrown off their balance; it would be too much for them if all the Lord's people were prophets. But whatever their value, no one can pretend that the path to perfection is to be found in stereotyping ways of being good or of doing good. Even one good custom can corrupt the world, and only customs which in the strictest sense can become second nature have a right to last as long as nature itself. The true path to perfection is that of inspiration: it is the path revealed to those who stand in the presence of Christ crucified and to whom everything is legitimate - yes, and obligatory - which finds its motive there.

To refer to only one illustration of this. Everyone is aware of the degree of ineffectiveness which at present marks the Church's efforts to do good to the world. An immense amount of effort seems to be put forth with no adequate result. Those who have a real connexion with the Church and who take a real interest in it are few. To a large extent it seems to be beating the air, and even among its sincere members there are many who have little sense that they stand for anything inspired and inspiring. Is not that in great measure because the Church, in a world in which everything is alive and moving, has sunk too much from inspiration to routine? It goes on doing what it once did with effect, but what is effective no longer, because all around it has changed. We want to discover, not a new Gospel, but new ways of reaching man with the Gospel; a new intellectual construction of it which will answer to the ideals of truth and knowledge in the mind of our own time - a new utterance for it in the language of those to whom it is preached - new ways of helping the poor - new ways of exerting an influence on the social life in which we all share - new modes of approaching those who need the Gospel but do not want it; a new gift of inspiration, in short, telling on our life in every direction. This is the way to perfection, and to apply it to our methods of worship and of work is entirely in the line of the Apostle's thought. Perfection does not come by statute. It does not come by adherence to routine. It does not come by reverence for use and wont, however hallowed and venerable. It comes by receiving the Spirit, and the Spirit is received at the cross. It enters into us as we come under the spell of that great love, and as it enters it makes us free. We are born again into newness of life, and it is in that newness perpetually renewed, and not in the oldness of the letter - not in any fidelity to established rules or usages - that we are to serve God. Only as we stand in the presence of Christ crucified, and looking out on the world and its needs feel that we are at once free and bound to serve it in every way which the love kindled in us by the cross inspires, are we in the truly Christian attitude. It is the attitude in which goodness is not imposed, but creative. It is the attitude of the new man for whom all that is old has passed away. The blighting power of routine has passed, and in the new life of the Spirit, with its enthusiasm and liberty, the hope of perfection is opened to us at last.