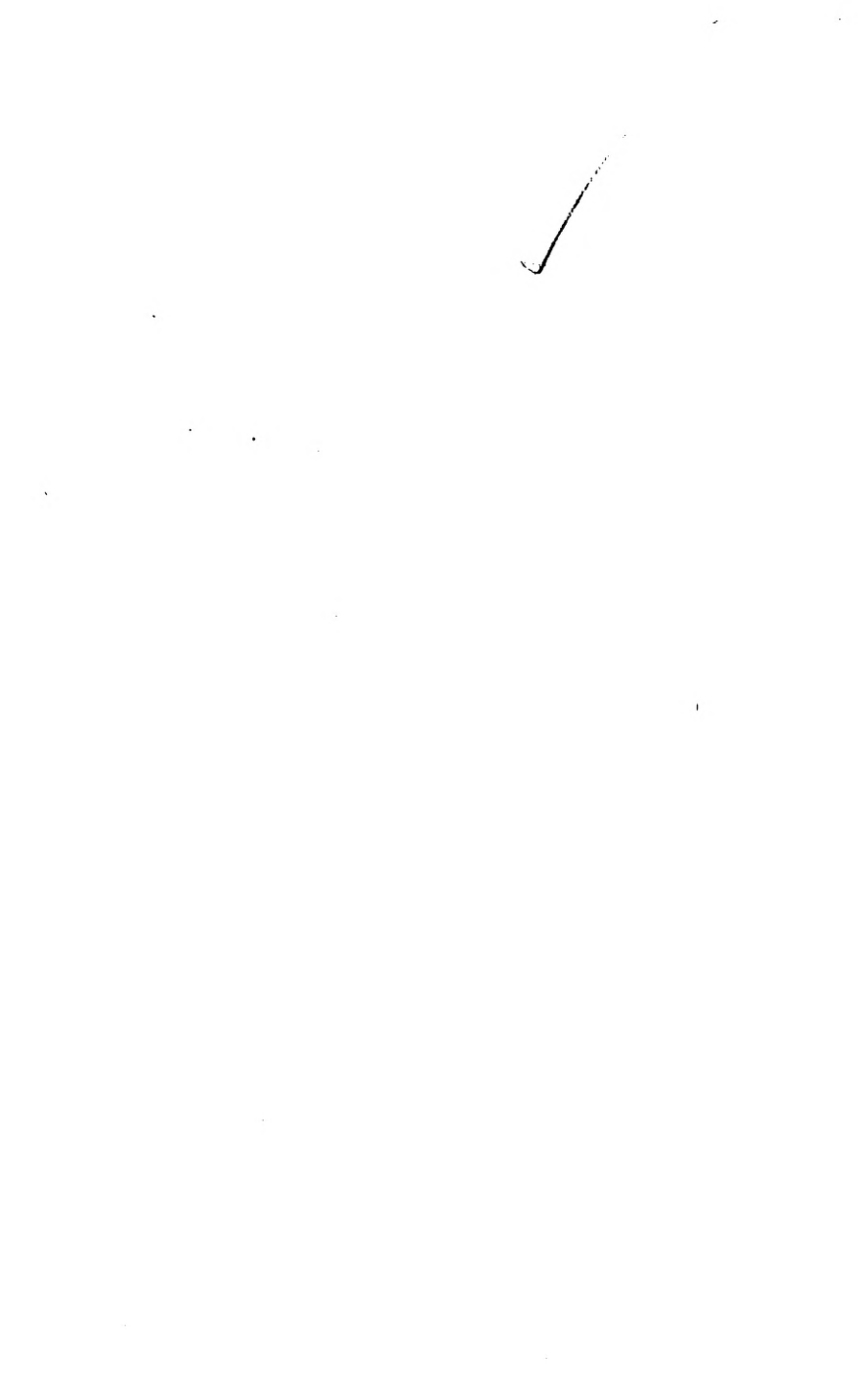




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*THE OBLIGATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY AND
CIVILIZATION TO THE HEATHEN.*

A SERMON,

Preached in St. Peter's Church, Eaton Square,

DURING THE

SESSION OF THE LAMBETH CONFERENCE,

JULY, 1878.

BY THE

RIGHT REV. R. S. COPLESTON, D.D.,

LORD BISHOP OF COLOMBO.

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THE OBLIGATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY AND CIVILIZATION TO THE HEATHEN.

ROMANS I. 14.

“ I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians.”

I TAKE it for granted, dearly beloved, that you are among those who watch with interest, and follow with your prayers, the great work which our Church is doing towards establishing throughout the world our Saviour's Kingdom. By that sympathy and those prayers you are bearing your part in that work. By those prayers you are actively helping those who are labouring far away. And we to whom those distant fields have been allotted feel it our duty and privilege, when we visit the Church at home, to make what return we can for the sympathy and the prayers you have bestowed on us, by telling you all we can of what we are seeing of God's dealings there; that you with us may trace the course of His wonderful Providence. We are very glad, too, if we can enable you to realize the exact position of affairs with us, to enter into our difficulties, and understand our problems; because we know that thus your sympathy will be quickened and your prayers made more intelligent and definite.

With this end in view, I shall now try to set before you the conditions of one problem which is now presenting itself to our Church, in many parts of the world, and in particular in the Diocese of Colombo, to which I belong.

What St. Paul said of himself may be said of our Church as a whole, and of many of her Bishops: "I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians."

In the days of the Apostles there was a great distinction between all who enjoyed the Greek and Roman civilization, on the one hand, and all the rest of mankind, the barbarians, on the other. In every part of the known world the civilized communities were rapidly gaining on their barbarian neighbours, subduing them, civilizing them, teaching them the language, manners, laws, of the Græco-Roman world. It was part of God's providential order, for the establishment and growth of Christianity, that this widely spread and ever spreading civilization,—these two languages, the Greek and the Roman, becoming every day more and more common,—should be the means of bearing abroad to the barbarian races the laws and doctrines of the Kingdom of Christ. That kingdom was not for the wise and civilized alone; the uncivilized races and those whose civilization was a different one from that of the Roman world,—these had also a claim on the Gospel, and on the Apostle who preached; "I am debtor," he said, "both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians." Now we, in our day, share in a great European civilization, and we, like the ancients, distinguish—though not quite so exclusively—between the civilized European, and those whom we call "natives." Whether they be inhabitants of North America, of the Cape, of New Zealand, or of India,—alike we call them "natives"; and this word has thus acquired a meaning, not far removed from that of the word "barbarians." The historian of St. Paul's shipwrecks says that at Melita "the barbarous people showed them no little kindness." We should say in a similar case, that they were kindly treated by the "natives." In every part of the world, and ever increasingly, civilized races are in contact with "natives." And it has pleased God that our Anglo-Saxon race and English language should be foremost, at the present time, in "over-spreading the whole earth." Our language is marked out to be the instrument for carrying God's truth to the nations of the world. Our Church has the mission to carry the truth to these native races, with which, through our colonies, we are

everywhere in contact. And accordingly our Church, which was once the Church of England only—a local branch of the one Catholic Church—is now the Church not of England only, but the Church of many vast colonies and the Church of America. This it has already become, and we are now on the threshold of a period, in which this great Anglican communion is to become the Church, not merely of every portion of the Anglo-Saxon race, but also of countless alien peoples, or as we say, native races. “We are debtors both to the Greeks and to the barbarians.” This future lies before our Church; and wondrous is the spectacle which God is preparing for those who shall see its accomplishment.

It is but a little while since the Church of England entered on her vast colonial enterprise, and now see her, assembling her Bishops from all those flourishing provinces! Who can tell how soon, in God’s infinite power, many native Churches, free and living their own life, and yet bound to us in close communion, will be represented in such a Conference? They will be free, and living their own life, with all their national characteristics vigorously displayed, and adding each its own contribution of invention or discovery to the spiritual wealth of the one Church; and yet they will be ours, recognisable as the children of their mother, and sharing a common life.

Hitherto, or until very lately, the Churches of other races than the Anglo-Saxon have been, in some sense, outside us. They have been the objects of our efforts and help, but as our pupils rather than as members of our family. We sent Missions to them; we influenced and guided them; but we still called them converts, not a Church. Even their own native Clergy we called Missionaries. But now we are learning to call them Churches, and to see that they have a Clergy and Councils of their own.

Our Anglican Church is thus entering on a new phase of existence, as she passes from being the Church of the Anglo-Saxon race, to being the Church of many races, and peoples, and tongues. In this process there will arise many difficult questions. At what stage is the Native Church to be treated as able to walk alone? To what extent must the Native Church

separate from the Anglo-Saxon Church? To what extent is the progress of Church organization to wait upon the progress of civilization, or to follow the lines of political arrangements? These are some of the great questions which God the Holy Spirit, in answer to faithful prayer, will guide His Church to solve.

To make you realize more clearly the nature of such questions I will take one, and deal with only a part of that. "To what extent must a Native Church separate from the Anglo-Saxon Church?" There are, as a rule, serious differences of language, customs, capacities, which tend to separate. It is difficult for those who speak different languages to meet in one church for service, or in one synod for counsel. It is difficult for peoples of widely differing customs to adopt one ritual and discipline. For peoples of widely differing capacities, it seems impossible that there should be one standard of devotion, or of qualification for the ministry. Such considerations have made people eager to set the Native Churches free, and not hamper them by English customs or rules.

On the other hand, if you cut these Native Churches off from the English, you cut them off, to a great extent, from the food on which Churches live. Through the English Church and language, they are to gather the experience of past ages, in the history of God's dealings with His Church; through the English Church and language they are to be admitted to those treasuries of sacred science and devotion, the whole realm of theology, of Christian biography and the like, which are the precious inheritance of God's people. By contact and union with the older Church, and perhaps then only, they can be kept stable, and safe from the hasty changes both in doctrine and in life to which new converts and young Churches are liable. What would the British Church have grown to, had she remained isolated and cut off from the life and the wealth of the Churches of the West and East? What should we have been without the Latin which brought us Augustine, and the Greek which brought us Chrysostom? Such considerations would make us desire that the Native Churches should cling as closely as possible to their mother and nurse.

It is evident that no one rule will apply to all. Some races, as they learn our faith, are learning as quickly or have already learnt, our language, and thus one great barrier is broken down. Some native races are under our political rule, and in close intercourse with our social life, and so their customs are becoming like ours, and that barrier is disappearing. As to capacities again: while some native races are, at present at least, altogether inferior, intellectually, to the European, others, like the Indians, are of the same original stock as ourselves, and capable of an equal culture. Hence, while some must inevitably remain apart, others cannot be, even if it were desirable, wholly separated from ourselves. The question of degree in this matter, with regard to any particular country, is one of the greatest interest, and it is just now particularly pressing in my own diocese.

In Ceylon, there are (omitting some smaller elements) four divisions of the population, each largely represented in the Church. These are the English—civilians, merchants, planters, and others; the Sinhalese, who are the proper natives of the island; the Tamils, who are partly immigrants from South India settled in Ceylon for many centuries, and partly immigrants continually coming and returning, for the sake of employment; and fourthly, the Burghers, a mixed race chiefly of mixed European and native descent. Among these four classes three, or we may say four, distinct languages are spoken, English, Sinhalese, Tamil, and, to a small extent, Portuguese.

Observe, then, the practical question which confronts us. Are these four Churches, or are they four elements in one Church? Should they use the same buildings? should they sit in the same councils? should they accept one Book of Common Prayer and one discipline, or should these vary for each? [I go into this because I want you to sympathize with us, and to know for what matters we need the guidance of the Spirit.] There is much to be said on both sides. The Tamil Christians are converts from Hinduism, while the Sinhalese are converts from Buddhism, and accordingly their dangers and prejudices are not the same, and so what would shock the remains of

caste-feeling in the ex-Hindu, would not strike the ex-Buddhist ; a practice which would be dangerously like some superstition from which the one had escaped, might have no such associations for the others. The English Prayer-book, with its allusions to English customs and English history, is not wholly suitable for either Tamil or Sinhalese, or even Burgher. With these differences of character and custom, and the obvious difference of language, how can they all be one ? On the other hand, the natives of both races are being Anglicised very rapidly, more rapidly than they are being Christianised, and the English language—the only key to all the knowledge of the West, and to all the Commentaries and Treatises of the Church—is fast becoming known to all. English, Sinhalese, Tamil, and Burgher sit together in the Legislature, on the Bench, at the Office, at the dinner-table ; why should they be severed only in the Church ? All are striving to assume English civilisation, just as it is, and hence all that there is of culture and advancement among the native races will inevitably attach itself to the English element, and refuse to be relegated to the native Church, if that were kept separate from the English. On the other side again, it is characteristic of the Gospel that it is preached to the poor, and the poor of these native races will yet be a long time before they learn English ways.

You see how difficult a question this is, and yet of how vital importance to the future of these Churches. On one hand is the danger lest Christianity should be a foreign and unreal thing to these people, on the other the danger lest they should be left cut off from a large part of the spiritual inheritance of the Church. How are such questions to be solved ? Surely not by relying on our own ingenuity, balancing probabilities and expediencies, and attempting to forecast the future ; but by asking for the old paths, by seeing what God has led His Church to do when similar questions were before her in earlier days. Questions essentially similar were met, and practically answered, at many periods in the Church's history. It was so conspicuously in the Apostolic period, when the one Church was established in so many nations and in so many places

where the population was of mingled elements, and again in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, when the Church was spreading from the outskirts of the Roman empire to the surrounding barbarian peoples. Neither Holy Scripture nor Church history is very explicit upon the point. Indications will need to be collected from many different sources and diligently compared, before it can be clearly shown by what means chiefly, in either of these periods, the difficulties were overcome. It needs study, from those who have learning and time for study, but no inquiry would better repay the labour. I must try to indicate the kind of facts which would have to be sought out and compared.

With regard to the Apostolic period, we are told that on the day of Pentecost men from a great many different nations heard spoken in their own tongues the wonderful works of God. These men, therefore, spoke many different languages; and we have no reason to think, although the teachers were enabled to speak to each, that the gift of tongues enabled the Libyan to understand the Parthian, or the Crete to understand the Arabian. Yet when out of so many different elements the infant Church had been gathered, "all that believed were together, and had all things common." This wonderful unity, this drawing of many elements together to form one Church, was the work of the Holy Ghost, repealing so far the penalty of Babel, but how it was effected we know not. It does not seem likely that there was any one language which all could speak. Most must have known something of the Hebrew tongue, being Jews or proselytes; but we read in historians that many even of the more cultivated of the foreign Jews, such as the great Philo, were ignorant of Hebrew. Greek, though known to many, was not generally known among the lower classes of the provinces, as we see from the question of the chief captain, who was surprised, or affected to be surprised, at St. Paul speaking Greek. The Latin language, though known to many in Judæa as well as other countries dependent on Rome, would certainly have been strange to very many of those enumerated. We cannot therefore say *how* the Apostles were guided, or enabled to hold together all these in one Church.

Still it may be said that all these had *already* much in common, seeing that they had all come together to Jerusalem to the feast.

Soon after, in the young Church, we do find a difficulty arising, not necessarily from difference of language, but from difference of race or custom; when the Hellenists or foreign Jews, who had become Christians, complained that their widows were neglected. The Apostles were divinely guided to meet this difficulty. They did not say, let us divide; let the Grecians form a separate branch of the Church; but they provided the seven deacons; they retained the unity, while recognising the existence of distinctions within it.

Wherever they went founding the Churches, the Apostles met similar difficulties; for there was hardly a town in which there were not to be found four elements and four languages—the native language of the country, that of the Roman rulers, that of the ubiquitous Greeks, and that of the Jews who were scattered, as traders, everywhere. No doubt these different elements in one town were to a great degree already amalgamated, just as in my own cathedral town of Colombo, Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers, and English hold continual intercourse; but they were still very widely distinguished, lived often in separate quarters of the city, each habitually using their peculiar customs and their peculiar tongue. At Lystra there were Jews and Greeks, and those who spoke the language of Lycaonia; and though the Jew may have known a little Lycaonian, and the native may have known a little Greek, yet neither could really think or pray in any language but his own. And yet when the Apostles went through these regions, and ordained them elders in every Church, we see no trace of their assigning distinct positions to these distinct elements in each.

The problem which was before the Church a few centuries later was still more like our own. At the end of the second century we find Tertullian saying that if Christians served in the Roman army they would find Christians among the barbarians whom they had to fight against; “for Christ,” he says “is among barbarians also.” Among the earliest records of the martyrs we find, as at Vienne in Gaul, or at Carthage, the

Asiatic Attalus,¹ the Phrygian Alexander, the Roman lady and the barbarian slave-girl standing together in one sacrifice.

As a rule, we find, I believe, very few allusions in the Christian writers to these distinct elements within the Church, and it would seem that the rulers of the Church troubled themselves very little with the difficulty, leaving it to settle itself as the Roman civilization and language rapidly conquered its way. Those who became Christians were, in great measure, compelled also to become Romans. But this cannot have been always or very quickly the case, especially when the Gauls, and Vandals, and Huns, came in by thousands into the Church, though we read of Vandals and Roman citizens using one church at Carthage. But to this silence of ancient writers on the point, the writings and life of St. Chrysostom afford an exception, and the allusions to his relations to native Churches are of great interest. Of him an English historian says: "With a view of converting the Gothic barbarians at Constantinople, Chrysostom ordained clergy of their own race, gave up one of the churches for a service in their native language, and himself often preached there, his words being rendered into Gothic by an interpreter." "The Archbishop also laboured for the propagation of the Gospel by sending missions to the unconverted Goths and Scythians." Again we read, "In exile he directed Missionary labours in Persia, and among the Goths; while his friends at a distance supplied him with funds so amply that he was not only able to support these missions and to redeem captives, but even had to request that their overflowing liberality might be directed in other channels." Chrysostom, we are told, speaking in a church immediately after a Gothic presbyter, appeals to the admission of natives to the ministry as a proof of the large-heartedness of the Church. The Church of Constantinople in the fourth century was thus a missionary Church exactly in our sense, but it does

¹ See Eusebius, who tells us that Attalus, a Pergamene by race, is said to have spoken *πρὸς τὸ πλῆθος* in the Roman tongue, so that apparently they understood it; yet it seems remarkable that the fact of that language being used should be so often noticed. Attalus, though a Roman citizen, was not beheaded, but tortured and exposed to beasts—a custom generally confined to provincials.

Sanctus, another of the martyrs in Gaul, refused to say of what *ἔθνος* he was, and only answered *τῆ Ρωμαϊκῆ φωνῆ*, "I am a Christian."

not appear that there was any idea of erecting the "native" or "barbarian" element on an independent basis.

These are but scanty indications of a line of inquiry which I would commend to the learned, in the confidence that we should find in it most valuable guidance for our present course.¹

At the same time it would be necessary to look not only at processes, but also at results; to observe, not only whether steps were taken to keep the various churches independent, or on the other hand to hold them together, but also whether different races of nations did, as a result, develop different sides of truth, and exemplify different aspects of the Christian character. If it be true, as we are told on good authority it is, that to different elements in the Church we owe different parts of truth; and if it is God's will that in their turn these, which we now call native races, should bring to light, in the course of their own divinely-guided life, aspects of the Christ-life which the old peoples have missed, then we must be careful how we insist on uniformity, lest in any way we crush, so to speak, this divine originality of the Churches.² We owe them nurture, but also we owe them freedom; we are bound to recognise the liberty of the native as well as the civilized Churches. "We are thus debtors both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians."

These things are in the hand of God. We labour and plan here below, but above the King sits upon His throne, ruling His own Kingdom. Our wisdom is to mistrust our own wisdom, to follow the steps through which He has already led His Church; and above all to be ever looking unto the Lord, that He may guide us with His eye.

¹ In a Conference held at Capetown under the presidency of Bishop Gray, "the opinion was unanimous rather to let the Clergy minister to the English and Kafir population in combination, than to increase the number of Mission stations; the contrary system tending, as experience proved, to create a feeling of mischievous separation between races."—*Life of Bishop Gray*, Vol. ii. p. 141.

² See Professor Westcott's *Religious Office of the Universities*, Sermon preached at Cambridge on the Second Sunday in Advent, 1872.





