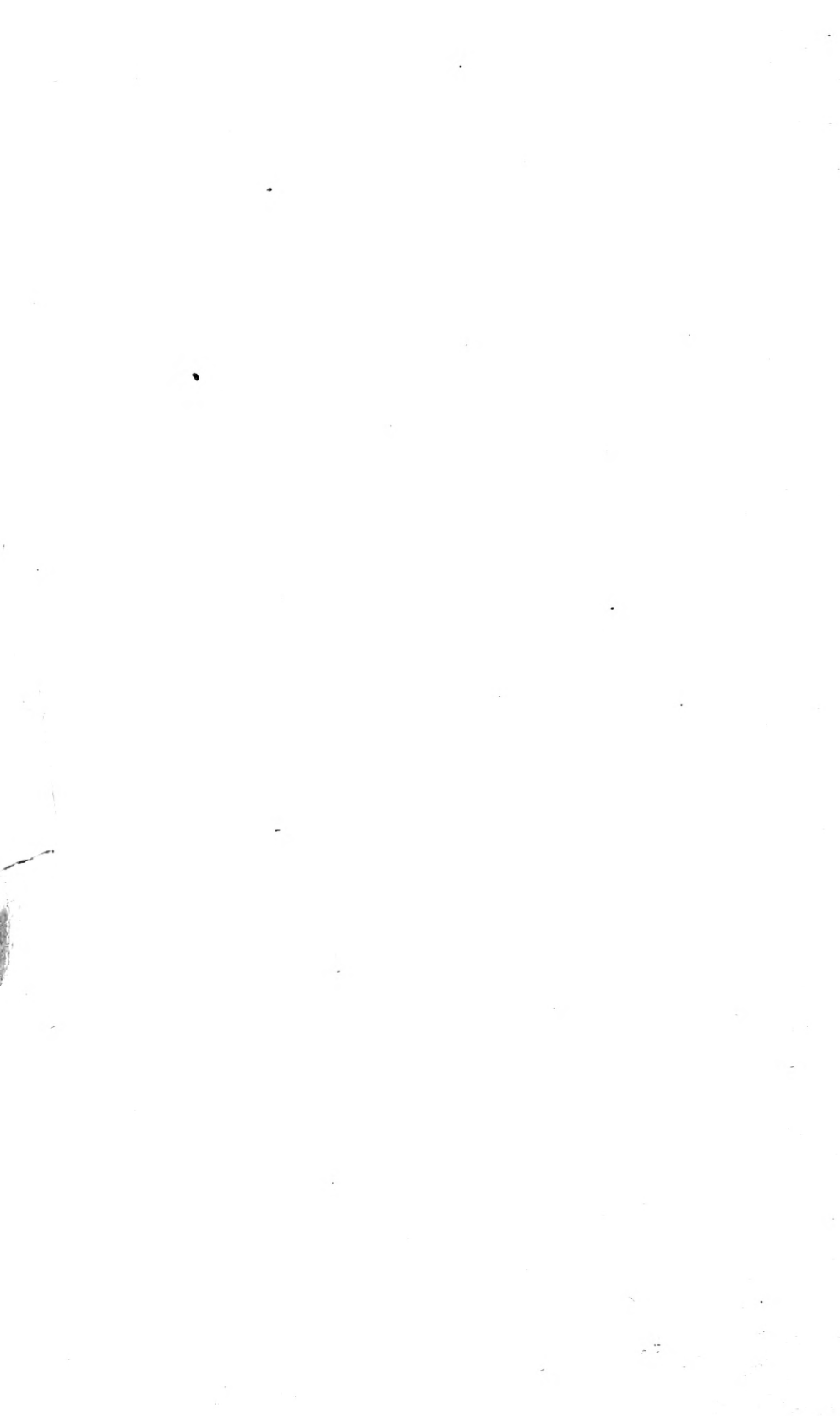


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H. T. Talbot

# A SERMON

*Preached at the Church Congress, Northampton, October, 1902.*

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“Wherefore, my beloved . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you.”—*Phil. ii. 12, 13.*

A MOTIVE for energy and a reason for anxiety—the Apostle finds both in that primary truth of God’s work within us which, at the end of his unrivalled recital of the stupendous condescension of Jesus Christ, is left freshly vivid before his mind.

Is the truth, so central to him, one of special significance for our own time? We ought, on an occasion like that which brings us here, to consider, to walk about Zion and tell the towers thereof, to take account, to see how we stand, to look whether we move and whither, to note what the days last past have done for us, where the hopes or dangers of those next to come may be. Perhaps there is no better or, in the deepest sense, more encouraging result of such thoughts and questionings than when they bring us to the clearer recognition of some great truth which has been the spring and common secret of movements outwardly diverse, towards which many paths run up, which sometimes the very failure of things wherein we trusted may serve only the more clearly to disclose; and to which, in proportion as we discern it, we ought more consciously and directly to turn for strength and help. It is as though in some hill country where we have been following our pleasant woodland tracks and mounting little heights and points of vantage, we come out upon the open and discern, high above us, the lofty peak or the solemn mass of the great hill or moorland about whose flanks we have been moving, whose swell and lift, though itself was unknown to us, has been under our feet as we mounted, and towards whose height converging

tracks have come. Perhaps there are reasons which at this time point to the need and to the hope of some such disclosure. For I feel pretty sure that there is among us a sense of discouragement. We doubt whether we are making way. There is a sense that we are not on the flow of the tide, and perhaps feel its ebb. We look back over religious history, and discern the difference, more clear than the reasons of it, between times of spiritual movement and awakening, and those which are stagnant and uninspired. We know that we have had immediately behind us times of the former kind. We ask ourselves whether we may be entering upon one of the latter. We complain to each other of prevalent indifference to religion. We note the breakdown of pious custom and wholesome restraints. We do not feel, among religious people themselves, a counter-ailing depth and earnestness. If we have ourselves felt the strength of one of the great religious movements, we recognize with sorrow that it does not hold men as it did. The sons of the Evangelical revival or of the Oxford Movement look alike for the old fervour, the old intensity, the well-defined characteristics, and sadly own that they do not find what they did. They feel the loss in themselves, and they think that they observe it in others. Differing between themselves in other things, they agree in this discouragement. It is keener, perhaps, from the very fact that religious activity of all sorts is so various, so strong, and almost feverish amongst us, just because in so many ways the experiments have been tried and the means used which we had hoped would increase the Church's grip upon her work and affect most for good the religion of the nation.

If I am right, your own thoughts will answer to what I say and be the best witness to it. Anyhow, after submitting to you my own impressions, I pass on to ask what, in face of such a condition, we ought to do and to think?

First, surely, to own it humbly. Here, as elsewhere, grumbling and whining do not help. If there are generations to whom God, in His mysterious wisdom, gives more, and others to whom He gives less of His Spirit's power, and if He should have set us in one of the latter, this is, so far as it is independent of ourselves, a matter for humble submission. Only such humility must have in it no grain of apathy. On one side it must deepen into penitence. Can we doubt that we are largely to blame? Have we taken as matters of course what were really exceptional gifts of God? Are we blinder because we have seen? Have the works done among us by greater than human power left our heart as a generation or a Church harder? History has its precedents for such things to wake our alarm. The relapse into apostasy after Josiah's reformation; the overclouding within half a century of the light that was flashed from Assisi upon the conscience of the Middle Age; the awful coldness of the mid-eighteenth century, following on all the

steady, quiet prayer, and study, and observance, and charity of the generation which saw the century open (the first, perhaps, which worshipped in this building)—these things give us warning and make us tremble.

And then, on another side, humility must open into effort, and prompt for each of us the question, What must I do? The answer is certainly not this, that we must give up, disheartened, and put out of countenance with those things of truth or practice which we have inherited or received and of which we trusted that it was they that should be the instruments of a victorious work. That were to make popularity, or, at least, success, the test of truth. Nor, on the other side, will it suffice to repeat with one more effort of emphasis, to dint in with one more dogged push or thrust the old contention, the old instruction or appeal, however patiently these must be maintained. Still less shall we seek help by "dotting the i's and crossing the t's" of our own practice or teaching; seeking ever to prolong a line of development continually in one direction; to force the note and give sharper accent to what is already loud and shrill. To do this may be the way to maintain or increase the members of a party, but not to speak home to the conscience of a generation. Even human wisdom may remind us that the strength of truth lies not a little in its wholeness, that a needed development of one sort may require only the more peremptorily some other and different element, not to supersede it, but to keep it in harmony. And, more deeply, we must not forget that God's teaching and leading ever keeps its own character of paradox: "His ways not as our ways, nor His thoughts as our thoughts." His word comes not at all where we should have expected: its call is ever new as well as old; it is heard only by those whose expectant and attuned ears are not altogether full of the sounds which their own voices make.

Therefore we shall look further and we shall look deeper. Generations have not their call alike: they may be successive and different; or, again, the call of one generation may be to see in that of its predecessor something which could not at the time be discerned, which comes clear only under time's sifting power. These are two possibilities. I shall say little of the first. But if he who seemed to see deepest and most discerningly amongst us of late years—I mean Brooke Foss Westcott, Bishop of Durham—was right at all, the call to the Church in the thirties and forties to awake and remember herself, to assert her high commission, to speak with the tone of authority, to bring out the treasures of her ministry and sacraments, was succeeded half a century later by as loud a call, sounding still in our ears to-day, to meet, interpret, express, sanctify the instincts—spiritual, believe me, as well as material—which cry aloud for a bettering of social order, for a more real and effective brotherhood, for faith in motive forces higher

than those of gain or glory. Can it be said that that call has been sufficiently heard? Have even we, of the clergy at large, taken it to heart? Or have we despised it as too secular; shrunk from it as associated too much with non-Christian men or views; excused ourselves from the labour of understanding and interpreting which it requires; and perhaps feared, with some respect of persons, difficulties which it might occasion with important members of the congregation? Are the examples many and prominent, and do the best of them come from the Church, of those who in commerce and trade use the great opportunities of capital and ownership to inaugurate a better and fairer state of things? Let me instance with honour the name of Mr. G. Cadbury. Is the mark of the cross plain upon the Christian part of society (as the name goes), which gets, all the witnesses agree, more luxurious every day? Are we, as a community and a Church, eagerly and intensely occupied upon that most difficult work to which this call of later days summons and bids? If not, are we, perchance, at all in the case of that young man who had his religious interests, and could ask his questions, and was indeed in character and conduct not far from the Kingdom of God, but could not bear the touch of sacrifice, and wished the great possessions to be left out of his practical problem? Are we to find here in part some inner secret of the little effectiveness of much which seems so true, and good, and earnest, and beautiful in the Church work of to-day?

This, however, is not my matter now. I have neither the skill nor the moral right to handle this difficult theme.

Can we take the other alternative and look deeper into what we have had? Is there, as I asked at first, a great truth coming out clearer, in the light of which we may read afresh and more deeply the meaning of what we have, gaining new keenness in our own hold of it and fresh power in our presentation of it to others?

Is it possible that this is true of the truth contained in the text, the working of God, the real working of God Himself, in us? Is it to this that along many paths He is and has been drawing many men?

I think I discern this more plainly, perhaps, than I can express it to you. But let me at least suggest it to your thoughts. Let us fix our mind definitely on what we mean by help of contrasts. Not what God prescribes to us, nor even what He sends us help to do; not what we do for God; not merely what is like God in us; but God actually and indeed working within us. Now, this is plainly not a truth of revelation alone and exclusively; it is one in which the poet, the philosopher, the believer in natural religion have their part, and perhaps find their inspiration. But it forms their common ground with the Christian, and therefore it is of high interest to see that in the forms which they too recognize, it has come home of late with



fresh force to men's minds. For it was not always so. The Deists, we know, in forms characteristic of the eighteenth century, thought of God as above, not within, His creation; as impelling or having once impelled it, not as informing it; a first cause of its being and movement, not their inspiring Spirit. And then in the nineteenth century and well within the time of the older among us, the swiftly-disclosed fascination of natural things, the recognition of law and uniformity, the apparent sufficiency of nature to explain herself, seemed to leave no room for God; a popular materialism paid Him no heed; and His believers were baffled and puzzled to say where they found room and place for His work.

It is different now. Science is reverent in the presence of mystery which she has herself helped to reveal. The inadequacy of merely materialist explanations is recognized. Matter itself has almost lost substance and reality under the ever-advancing power of analysis; it has lost the solidity which could exclude God; the spiritual side of things is felt to be at least as real. And this means not that there is a place left for God somewhere, but that there is room for Him everywhere.

Movements of religious thought and feeling tend the same way. There is a great vogue for the name of mysticism, and though much of it is superficial and its meaning indistinct, it is pretty clear that men are not thinking so much of that mysticism which seeks God by abstraction from all visible and created things, but rather of that which would penetrate through them to some meaning at their heart, some presence which they half disclose and half conceal. What is it again which lends attraction to that strange farrago which calls itself "Christian Science," and in spite of all its irritating paradoxes and pseudo-science, secures it a welcome from many who are both able and good? The problem has been studied by one of the ablest and most vigorous of contemporary philosophers, and he finds as the secret that it comes to weary and baffled minds with a strong summons to recognize and respond to the divine presence, the divine element, in themselves. The thought of it gives to people the special stimulus which comes of being "brought to themselves" and finding in themselves (as S. Augustine did though in a very different way) what they had sought in vain outside.

Thus, I think, in ways upon which I must not weary you by dwelling, there is in thought around us congeniality with, there is preparation for, that truth which the Apostle declared: "It is God that worketh in you."

When we come within the religious sphere, properly so called, when we come to the interpretation of the Christian Revelation, what do we find? We find, indeed, at first sight a heartbreaking and internecine strife. We find within the area of Christian belief, even within the limits of our own part of

the Church, the mutual distrust and defiance of those who press the reality, the significance, the necessity of sacraments, and those who more or less deny or distrust them, and who look for the reality and purity of religion to what they describe as more independent and direct contact with God. This is the conflict between the Roman Catholic and the Society of Friends, between the Churchman and the Plymouth Brother, and in a degree, within the English Church and even within the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, between the High Churchman and the Low ; being in truth, far more than is recognized, a difference of mental temperament before ever it is one of objective creed. This is the conflict which controversy, especially in its baser and more ignorant forms, is ever exasperating and hardening, flinging backwards and forwards the charges of superstition and irreverence, of materializing and desecration, and trying its hardest to persuade brethren in Christ that they can have no communion one with another. May we, to-day at least, turn our thoughts from this opposition, real and undoubted as it is, to rest them upon that which is, to say the least, as real, but much more often overlooked—I mean the underlying unity beneath the opposites?

For is it not true that the thing for which, each in his own way, these unlikes (where genuine) are alike eager, is the presence, real, living, spiritual, of God Himself with and in His own? It is Christ among us, Christ in us, and God through Christ. It is for this that in his rage of desire one man will break the mould of every form to get straight, as he thinks, at the precious ointment of the presence ; to secure this, surer than all words, safe from dependence upon wavering moods, another man will exalt to the uttermost the consecrated method, the definite, local, almost visible gift. Surely, we find this inner unity in the likeness between the most spiritual utterances of widely separated men : it is witnessed even by the kinship between weaker tendencies, as in the parallelism between the sentimentalism of some sacramental devotions and that of some evangelical hymns, which harp on thoughts and phrases such as the sweetness of Jesus.

We, brethren, in the Church of God, have this happiness and blessing that our Lord Himself has in part, at least, decided for us this matter of method by giving us definite sacraments of His power and presence : decided it, that is, not by the defining language of words which divide and perplex, but by the silent speech of acts which unite ; acts of utter simplicity, yet of richest mystical power. Happy we, if resolutely minimizing controversy by rising to what is really highest, we can unitedly lay hold upon the truth of the living Giver present to give us in His own way living gifts, parts of the one Gift which is life from Himself. Happy if we can recognize that different races, times, and strains of opinion or temperament may treat these great things of divine operation with more or less of simplicity or splendour,

and mean by both alike the same purpose of doing fullest reverence to the real working of God amongst and within us. Well for us if we resolutely decline to focus interest upon questions of definition about which the history of controversy has taught us with utter plainness that there is no thoroughfare, that each added sharpness of assertion means a fresh brusqueness of rejection; that with much speech there comes to each side increasing peril of worshipping the image in their own heart instead of the Truth; and to all sides ever deeper misunderstanding and mistrust of one another.

Thus may Christians who find their secret in the revealed in-working of God understand each other; thus also may they find their union with all that is good and fair everywhere in human life and thought. For there is but one God, in nature and redemption, and one Lord, the Word, Who is, as the old theologians delighted to teach, the *λόγος σπριματικὸς* through all creation, as well as the Incarnate Jesus Christ.

But is there not in a full and true interpretation of the faith one part and article which should be the special remedy of much of our trouble, the spring of ever fresh hope? "I believe in the Holy Ghost." There, let us strive constantly and passionately to realize, is God's own expression, His own revelation of that by which man's natural sense of God's immanence is fulfilled, of that by which the living presence of the Incarnate is continued and embodied. By this the gift especially promised to prayer; by this, both apart from sacraments and through them; or (to speak more worthily) by Him without Whose help illuminative knowledge of the written Word becomes ingenious scholarship or barren literalism, by Him Who quickens the pulse and kindles the torch of each personal life, while the body corporate is His only adequate temple and instrument—by Him God is present, God works in us. I beseech you think of Him, pray for a right understanding through Him of Himself; leave it not to special leagues or sects to provoke us honourably to jealousy for this great and wealthy truth, to loyalty towards this Spirit of God in our spirits, to this Life of God in our lives. Let it give its own temper, and restraint, and glow, and depth, and force to the whole life which we call Christian in our Church.

Brethren, this is a great matter, too high for a single speaker—much more for the one who has spoken; not too high and unquestionably right as at once the inspiration and the goal of the devotional, intellectual, and practical effort of the Church.

We know the danger of dwelling on such things without practical conclusion, without moral result. I close, then, with the mention of three things which seem essential to a real reception of the truth and power of God working in us.

The first is contained in the old counsel, "Vacare considerationi." Take time to think, find it, make it, compel it.

The business is too big for want of thought. Not students only, or leaders, but our rank and file must be praying in their closets; they must be wrestling, themselves, for the living truths in Scripture, putting the truisms and commonplaces of religion into the fire of the Spirit till they glow white as truths indeed. Press home, face doubt, look into the problems, try your teachers, and choose the deepest. And all this because so to do it is to open the channels for the inflow of God's working, to keep ready for its touch, responsive to its call. Here is a matter on which each one here can determine to offer their mite to the common stock of the Church's real life.

The next is discipline. The lack of it amongst us is surely portentous. Think of the working of God in us and what it asks and requires—inlets ready and open for its entrance, space wherein to dwell—room, in simplest phrase, for its strength: a soul which is as the supple, pliable, well-tempered instrument for its use. Then think of what we are: all the unruliness, and thoughtlessness, and ineptitude; all the strong and wandering desires; all the stiff-jointedness and unreadiness; all the absorbedness (if so deep a word can be put to such use) in the changing, passing, ephemeral things. And when you have brought these two together and pondered on the contrast, then think of the prevailing absence, neglect, and, shall I say, contempt of all discipline, rule, method in spiritual things. *Askesis*, practice, exercise, training—where is it? We had it in ancient forms of fasting, vigil, and shrift; we had it in Puritan severities of Sabbath-keeping and amusements proscribed, and Bibles read from cover to cover; we had it in the dear domestic discipline of the English Christian home, the authority, perhaps too magisterial and stern of the father, the control, perhaps too prim and limited, of the mother; the family worship; the understood restraints. How much of any of these do we keep? We know how to criticise them all. What have we in their place? We have gained, no doubt, in a greater use at home and in school of love rather than fear; in less censorious judgment of other men's liberty; in more naturalness and freedom of growth; in the absence of bitter re-actions against harsh or irksome restraint. But where is the right severity, the wholesome restraint, the steady method, the pruning-knife of character and spirit?

Is it the case—I speak to my brethren in the ministry—that the younger men are found less ready for the small sacrifice of the three days' retreat, to which we of the generation above them owe so much of the little that we had? Or that if clergy are gathered for a devotional meeting, large numbers seem, when an address is over, to have no instinct or capacity for either devotion or thought of their own?

Is it not time that we lay stress upon this—that method, discipline, a measure of hardness and self-denial, are an essential

feature of a true Christian life; that money spent without a careful setting apart of a proportion for God and the poor; Lord's Day habits which leave the spirit unrefreshed and take no account of labour caused to others; no method about Bible-reading or meditation; no rules or habits of bodily self-denial; no mortification of flesh or spirit; the things of the higher life left to chance or impulse, which means, of course, leaving them to be devoured by the wayward devices and the engrossing occupations—all this together goes to make a state in which the word and work of the Lord in us cannot have free course and be glorified; a state of soul and of Church which shines with no unearthly light and fatally lacks the power of the regeneration.

Here again each may do something, and each is bound to do it. The privileges of the life of God within us is an awful thing. It has a touch of fire. To be named spiritual men (and it is the calling of every one of us to be so named) is something to abash us to the earth when we think of what we are. "Quicken Thou us, O Lord, according to Thy Word."

And the last thing, as you will guess, is charity, or shall I say service. For God is Love, and more and more we realize that only where love is can God work; that love prompts sacrifice and controls it into sweet, wholesome, and helpful forms. There is so much, so frightfully much, that wants doing for human life and for the poor, and the love of God working in us alone makes zeal; there is so much need for stooping, for coming down to do it, and the love of God in us alone makes humility; there is so much call for every Christian to show the spirit of service, and nothing can prompt and sustain them in doing so but the grace of Him Who took the form of a servant and was among us as He that serveth. For He was all love, and as in Him the patient stooping, victorious love of God found and formed its perfect instrument, so His Spirit, stoops still to sheathe and incarnate love in human souls, and to work out, through them, the work of His Love.

Let us plead continually for some fresh rush and sweep of this zealous, stooping, serving love through the whole body of the Church in this easy, shallow, selfish time. It is in this above all else that we would have Him "raise up His power and come and help us, and with great might succour us." Then would controversies be changed into that which they ought to be, and appear as differences of spiritual insight among men joined together in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God; then out of Christian families would young men and maidens come forth abundantly for every needed ministry; then out of England's enormous wealth would the faith of her Church's sons unlock treasures of liberal and costly giving for the support of the ministry, and for the attack upon the vast tasks of evangelization in her towns; then would spiritual forces of faith and love bring low the mountains of difficulty which face

the Church amidst the teeming masses of England's people and far away among the peoples committed to her ; then into the hearts of the many for whom Christianity and the Church are names for suspicion or hostility or an immense indifference would be carried the witness, the irrefragable and victorious witness of that love, pure, burning, undeniable, which is only found in those in whom works the Incarnate Love. Let us plead and look for this, for without it we wither and die.







