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ARTICLE VIII.

THE CERTAINTY OF SUCCESS IN PREACHING.¹

By Austin Phelps, Professor at Andover.

THE doctrine of the sovereignty of God is commonly associated in the minds of men with repulsive topics of thought. No other doctrine so severely tasks the ingenuity of a preacher who would shield it from cavils and suspicions. Even Christian minds often assign it a place in a certain sombre group of truths in which it stands side by side with the doctrines respecting the existence of evil, and original sin, and reprobation; a group to which they turn for admonition rather than for encouragement. We are accustomed to speak of it as a rigid doctrine, a stern doctrine, a fearful doctrine, and in the simplicity of truth, it is all these. Yet, in the symmetry of truth, it is *also* a gentle doctrine, a benevolent doctrine, an amiable, a generous doctrine. Some aspects of it are immediately suggestive of hope, trust, love, and therefore of peace, and in hours when our vision of it is clear, of even the joy unspeakable. There is a regal magnificence in the glory which encircles it. As a central doctrine in the system of our faith, it throws its benign radiance to the utmost circumference. It moves among its kindred truths as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber. The light it casts on this world's destiny, reminds us of John's vision of the New Jerusalem. We remember that there was no night there.

Such, in the main, is the aspect of the sovereignty of God as applied to the preaching of the Gospel. *It ensures the success of preaching.*

In the first place, the true theory of the sovereignty of God involves a certain resemblance between the working of God's purpose in the preaching of the Gospel, and the working of the laws of the material world.

There are some truths which sound like truisms when they are reduced to the forms of language, and yet, in some of their legitimate applications, they strike our minds with all the force of paradox. Thus it seems needless to affirm that God rules as really, and as

¹ A Discourse delivered May 24th, 1853, in the Central Church, Boston, before the Pastoral Association of Massachusetts.

reasonably, and as absolutely, in the world of mind as in the world of matter. Yet this first truth of all religion involves consequences as to the preaching of the Gospel, which many a preacher is slow of heart to believe. We must infer from it that the preaching of the Gospel is linked with its results by established laws, as closely as are causes and effects in material phenomena. There is no more real disorder, no more of anomaly, no more of contingency, no less *compactness* of system, in the plan by which truth preached to the human mind is destined to work out its objects, than exists in the plan by which heat and cold affect the human body, or light glistens in the human eye. There is, there must be, a network of law as closely woven and as beautiful in texture, in the one department as in the other. We must infer, moreover, that, in the one case as in the other, the laws which govern results are only an expression of the will of God. They have no independent existence. They are not exposed to defeat by hidden chances. They are a simple declaration of an everlasting purpose emanating from an Almighty mind. They must, therefore, work out their end. No power can effectually strive against them. All other powers in the universe are their allies. An apparent attempt, even an apparently successful attempt, to circumvent them, is and must be, in the result, only an illustration of their fixedness.

We have, therefore, in the very nature of the case, as firm a ground of confidence in the success of preaching, as we have of confidence in the return of the dawn and the nightfall. A Christian mind has in this simple faith a noble vantage-ground of effort in disseminating the Gospel through the world. To the peace of such a mind, it may be what confidence in the laws of nature is to the repose of the world, amidst the elements that work with such fearful activity around us. The possibility of that which might be, is forgotten in the certainty of that which will be.

It is a still more interesting phase of this resemblance between the purposes of God respecting the Gospel, and His purposes as they are expressed by the laws of nature, that, in the one case as in the other, God does not consider it beneath Him, to descend to the utmost *minuteness* of regulation. It is the well-known characteristic of the Christian view of the laws of nature, that the personal agency of God is never isolated from them. In every solitary and seemingly trivial instance of their operation, God is present; God's work is visible; God's purpose is fulfilled. The Christian mind does, indeed, value the conception of the existence of order, of law, of system, in the

works of God. We are justly grateful to him who brings to our view a single new principle which helps us to classify isolated phenomena. We mention with reverence the names of such men as Newton and Kepler. We cannot but feel that such men add, each an eternal thought, to the knowledge of mankind. Yet we value more the simple faith of childhood, which sees God in the blossoming of each separate flower and in the twinkling of each star. That is our faith also. We rejoice in believing that every solitary event or thing is an illustration of a decree of God. The sun never gilded the mountains, the lightning never lighted up the midnight, the magnet never vibrated, and the dewdrop never settled on the violet, without obeying a law of God, nor without fulfilling a purpose of God, for which in part that law was ordained. And the sun and the lightning and the magnet and the dewdrop are all the more illustrious in our view, for this association with a fixed, eternal, intelligent purpose. Now, the corresponding view which our faith authorizes and even commands us to cherish respecting the dissemination of the Gospel, is, that in this, God condescends in a similar manner to link his purposes with results in their details, often in their seeming insignificance. Minuteness of regulation here, surely, is not less worthy of God than in the management of the unintelligent creation. "Ye are of more value than many sparrows." Divine truth, then, is never preached when God meant that it should be withheld; it is never withheld when God meant that it should be preached. And when preached it goes forth upon its mission, bearing on every breath that utters it to every ear that listens to it, a purpose formed before the world was. That same Eye which has looked its will that each separate raindrop and snowflake should come down from heaven, and that just so many should fall and should fall just here and there, casts the same imperial look upon the transactions of every Christian sanctuary. The very atmosphere of such a sanctuary vibrates incessantly beneath the going-forth of everlasting decrees. Such is the theory which must lie at the foundation of every intelligent view of the Divine sovereignty, as applied to preaching and its results.

A second aspect of the purpose of God in reference to the proclamation of the Gospel, may be observed in the fact that that purpose is accomplished by means, and with results, which are not contemplated in any plans of human origin. It is an observation which will often force itself on the mind of one who studies the Christian religion in a comparison with other systems of faith and other plans of operation for the welfare of mankind, that this religion stands alone.

It is unlike everything else that has been discovered or invented for the improvement of the race. In no particular is this more strikingly true than in the fact that it aims at *results*, which are contemplated by no other system the world has ever known. If successful, it is successful in the very things of which men must forever despair, under any other system of faith.

It is a noble suggestion of Dr. Chalmers, that many of the results of preaching which the world affects to despise, would be received with universal admiration, and would render immortal the name of the man who should be instrumental in achieving them, if they were only the fruit of a discovery in science or an experiment in philosophy. It is equally true that these despised results of preaching are not only never accomplished, but are never aimed at, by science or philosophy; nor do science and philosophy ever aim at *anything* that is comparable with them. The best success of the best plans men have ever devised for the elevation of this world, that success which *has* made those who achieved it immortal, would be justly considered a failure, if it were the result, and the only result, brought about by the Christian religion. The claims of this religion are literally superhuman in their character. It arrogates to itself powers never asserted by any other device of the human mind. No art, no science, no philosophy, no romance, no scheme of arbitrary power, no plan of philanthropic zeal, *nothing* that ever yet grew out of the self-directed struggles of mankind, has ever suggested the possibility of the regeneration of the human soul. This, with all the kindred ideas which constitute the very rudiments of the Christian system, has been wholly unknown to all other systems of faith and all other products of the most renowned civilization. There is something suggestive of the Divine origin of our religion in the very majesty of the power it *asserts* over the destiny of this world. What speculation in philosophy ever originated the idea of the possibility of this world's conversion? What experiment in literary culture ever proposed this for its object? What theory of the perfectability of the human race ever started the project of a Christian mission? What system of reform ever gave birth to the plan of transforming a tribe of cannibals into a Christian nation? What dream of romance ever pictured, in its wildest imagery, the scene of a solitary woman taming the ferocity of a licentious chief, and spreading through the heathen village which had been imbruted by his tyranny, the calm of a New England Sabbath?

But, not to dwell on the *results* of the proclamation of the Gospel,

it may be further affirmed, that, as respects the *means* employed in producing those results, the success of the Gospel is seen in forms which no other system of religious faith has ever proposed to its believers. The very idea of disseminating a religion, by appealing to the sober judgment and conscience of men, is of Scriptural origin. The whole theory of preaching is a Christian peculiarity. That a new religion should be preached, instead of being enforced by the sword, was a novelty in the world's history when the apostles entered on their mission. Their success must have been regarded by thinking minds as an anomaly. Paganism could not have paid a more significant tribute to the genius of Christianity, than that which it rendered in the vain effort of the Emperor Julian to introduce preaching among the usages of the Pagan priesthood. From that day to this, the Christian religion has stood alone in this respect, that *it can be preached successfully*. Other systems can be propagated by armed legions. Once established, they can live long upon the reputation of a splendid origin. Age often gives to them a momentum which carries them down through more than one generation, after the process of their decay is far advanced. But neither in their origin, nor in their triumph, nor in their decline, will they bear to be *preached*. To establish the supremacy of Christianity over everything else in the form of a religious system, we have only to propose to the advocates of other systems, one single inquiry: 'Where are your pulpits? You have temples and shrines and altars and sacrifices, but where are your pulpits? You have sacred books and a consecrated priesthood and solemn pageantries without number, but where are your pulpits?'

This view of the *singularity* of the work of preaching, illustrates the intrinsic grandeur of that success which the purpose of God ensures to the Christian ministry. It is a success which stands alone amidst all other achievements of the human mind. Its existence proves the Divinity of its origin.

The purpose of God in the proclamation of the Gospel may be still further illustrated by observing, in the third place, that the visible evidences of its accomplishment are often such as no human mind could have anticipated. No emotion is more frequently excited in Christian minds by the success of their cause, than that of *surprise*. Success comes often when least expected. God seems to take pleasure in disappointing the gloomy forebodings of his people. Sometimes, indeed, he realizes their highest hopes, but in ways, by means, and at seasons, which disarrange all their own plans, and cause

their wisest efforts to appear misdirected. Human exertions are temporarily arrested by the sudden, strange intervention of God in almost visible presence. A Christian community thus overtaken by an unexpected impulse secretly given to the cause of Christ, often seems to stand still in grateful amazement, while the rushing mighty wind gathers its strength around them and sweeps on. The word is on every tongue: "It is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes."

In cases, too, in which visible success is more immediately associated with specific instrumentalities, it is often achieved by an unconscious instrument. It is often true of preachers that they accomplish, in one sense, unintentional good. They forward designs of which they are ignorant. The result reveals their agency, but they thought not so, neither was it in their hearts. The truths of the Gospel often fall from the pulpit, to all human view, at haphazard. Preachers preach at random. They preach to those of whose hearts they have little knowledge. A stranger speaks God's truth in the ear of strangers. The speaker and the hearers are, by the evolutions of God's providence, brought together just for that single hour, then they part to meet no more on this side of the grave. Yet God has had a purpose in that preaching of his word at random. That purpose is as sure to be accomplished as is the purpose of the sudden shower in April.

It has been observed by almost every successful preacher, that often great good is seen to follow from a single presentation of the truths of the Gospel, from which no such results were anticipated. Secret causes have given to the truth an unlooked for efficiency. A single sermon, prepared with no special object in view, beyond the design to utter God's truth, has been sometimes the admired instrument of the conversion of many souls. It has found hearers to whom it was fitted when no peculiar adaptation was foreseen. Perhaps a view of truth which to the preacher seemed to be an unworthy production, prepared under the pressure of an emergency, prepared perhaps in great bodily weakness, and chosen on that occasion, only because it impressed his own mind as a reality, and because he could therefore with the greater ease throw his soul into the utterance of it, — such a view of truth, God has sometimes employed as a means of wonderful results. A discourse by Dr. Payson of which he had but a mean opinion, and which he wrote almost entirely in a single morning, he afterwards regarded as one of the most effective that he ever preached. "I could not but wonder," he writes, "to see God work

by it." Similar observations were made by Baxter and Edwards and Wesley and Summerfield, upon the results of their preaching. Wesley himself received the first impulse to that fervid piety which was almost the sole secret of his lifelong success, from reading the single section of Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Living and Dying," on the subject of "purity of intention," — a section which had been prepared, and probably in substance preached as a sermon, seventy-five years before, for the benefit of an humble congregation at Golden Grove, consisting chiefly, as the preacher tells us, of a few cottagers of the neighborhood, and the domestics of his patron. Whitefield, when returning on one occasion from the place where he had discoursed, and very poorly as he thought, to an immense assembly in the city of Boston, was overwhelmed almost to faintness, by the evidence he had received that God had wrought with great power, even by such an agency. "Why me, Lord, why me?" was the broken ejaculation with which he fell back into his carriage, when overcome by the thought that God had chosen him as the instrument of that marvelous working. The same truth is illustrated by a fact in the life of John Owen, already made familiar to many as an apt example of a similar truth in the history of preaching. We are informed that he was delivered from a deep despondency of mind of five years continuance, by the instrumentality of a single sermon upon the text: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" The sermon was delivered by an obscure and unpolished minister, whose name and residence he could never learn, but who was led, in the providence of God, to occupy for a single occasion the pulpit of Rev. Dr. Calamy, who was then at the height of his fame in the city of London, and to preach on *that* day, and to preach on *that part* of the day when Owen was providentially present, and to preach *that* sermon, but to preach it to a disappointed audience, who had assembled in expectation of hearing their distinguished favorite. Most signally was the purpose of God fulfilled by his word then preached at random. He gave it a secret power, that it might accomplish the thing which he pleased, and prosper in that whereto he sent it.

But not only is unexpected good often done by a single discourse, but often by a single sentence, in which the speaker unconsciously utters a truth which God has aimed at some waiting conscience. Said a living preacher, in a discourse upon the final success of the Gospel, "it is fixed in the purposes of an everlasting God that this world is to be converted." These simple words, uttered as they were with the calm earnestness of immovable conviction, seemed to con-

centrate into one vision the whole subject which had been discussed. They were long remembered by more than one who heard them, as the occasion of impressions which they would not willingly let die. They sank like lead into the heart of one young man who never found rest from the burden of them, till he hopefully gave himself to Christ.

But the illustration of the particular now before us, need not be limited to the results of the public preaching of the Gospel. Effects which to human view are marvellous, to a degree that borders upon the miraculous, sometimes follow from even the humblest methods of teaching Christian truth. About one hundred and fifty years ago, there lived in a stifled street in London, a tradesman and his wife who watched with many misgivings the slender form and pale cheek of a little boy, their only son, and, with one exception, the sole survivor of twenty children. The utmost that they dared to hope for, as the result of parental faithfulness, was, that "poor little Philip" might, by the grace of God, be prepared for an early death. For this they labored and prayed and wept together. The chimney of the family-room, where they usually sat after their evening-meal, was ornamented, according to a fashion which had been imported from Holland, with a series of painted tiles. On those tiles were pictured, with rude taste, scenes and events recorded in the Scriptures. There, "in deep blue on a ground of glistening white," were Adam and Eve and the serpent. Next in order were Elisha's bears devouring the irreverent children. Then followed Joseph and the pit into which his brethren cast him. And here, at the end of the series, we may suppose, stood the stern men who frowned on the little children as they came to Christ. Those pictured tiles were to "poor little Philip's" unlettered mother, more precious than the gold of Ophir. They were her pictorial Bible. In her homely way, she expounded them to her son, as he was seated by her side in the old arm chair. She poured into his curious ear her rude but truthful conceptions of man's lost condition, of God's wonderful providence, and of His more wonderful grace. She found a willing pupil. God's truth, extracted by maternal diligence from that painted wall, sunk deep into the pale boy's heart. His delicate sensibilities grew around it and became rooted in its embrace. The distinguishing feature of his youthful piety was a love of the Bible. It grew with his growth and strengthened with his strength. It fashioned itself in the depths of his soul into the germ of a hidden purpose, which the providence of God at length developed. Thirty years afterwards, when the Rev. Dr. Philip Doddridge was engaged in the work of composing the

"Family Expositor," he traced back the impulse, which by the grace of God had moved him to that work, to those old Dutch tiles which had been the text-book of his early lessons in his mother's arm chair. It was the remembrance of them, which quickened and sustained his zeal in the protracted labor of that which he considered his life's work. That remembrance it was, which lighted up his study-lamp for his labors upon the Family Expositor, at four o'clock of the winter mornings through a period of twenty years. That it was, which forbade him to turn aside from the exposition of the Bible, for any inferior service. Only in obedience to the earnest and often-repeated solicitations of his friend, Dr. Isaac Watts, did he consent to the digression of composing the Rise and Progress. And when at last he lay down to die, in a strange land, it was his strong consolation that he had been permitted to see three volumes of the Expositor given to the world. Since that time, a hundred years have come and gone, but the work of Doddridge lives. Considered as one of the earliest and the most successful of popular English commentaries on the Bible, and as a link in the chain of causes which have created a Biblical literature for the people, it is destined to live forever. The earthquake of Lisbon, which occurred soon after his death, rocked the ground where his bones reposed. It was a fit emblem of the commotion with which every benighted land shall one day be roused by the dissemination of the Sacred Scriptures, to which he had contributed the labors of a life.

But the illustration of the particular now before us, need not be limited to the remarkable events which occur under the preaching of the Gospel, and which are deemed worthy of preservation in religious biographies. The unrecorded experience of preachers and of teachers, and of hearers, if it could all be known, would pour forth its living testimony in confirmation of this view.

Do not many who have been listeners to preaching from their youth up, recall, even at this day, sermons and passages in sermons, which they heard in childhood? Do we not remember views of truth which startled us, appeals which moved our hearts, perhaps a solitary illustration of truth which opened a window of heaven and let in a flood of light upon our minds, possibly even the one word which was to our souls as the words of the wise? And does not the remembrance of many of those old messages of truth move us still? We have not outgrown them. We have become men, but our manhood has not put them away. They are among the fixed materials of thought around which our moral history has formed itself. They

have opened within us perennial fountains of feeling. We never can forget them. We feel a reverent affection for him whom God made the minister of the glad tidings. We would go a long way to hear his voice again. We sometimes feel as if our hearts still moved at the bidding of those well-remembered tones. Are there not in our lives moments spent in the sanctuary of God, which are so marked in our experience by the unlooked-for work of God through the power of his truth, that we can never cease to be grateful for them? They were worth to us years of other time. They were crises in our moral history. We expect to look back to them forever, with grateful interest.

The views now presented prepare us to observe further, that not only is the purpose of God with regard to preaching, often accomplished by results which no human mind could anticipate, but, in the fourth place, that purpose is often accomplished in *opposition* to the plans of men for its defeat. The history of the Gospel is a history of conflict. It would be instructive to observe here the varied and the deep-seated forces which the truth of God encounters in its application to any single individual. But, to vary the tenor of the illustration of this subject, we may turn from the records of individual history to the well-known reception which the Gospel has met in this world, as that reception is represented by the history of the Christian church. The point of chief interest in the illustration is, that periods have often occurred in the history of the church, when to human view, the plans of men formed against the Christian religion seemed to be on the eve of success. Setting aside the covenant of God with His people, and the purpose of God in the proclamation of His truth, and reasoning upon only the common grounds of probability on which men are accustomed to reason respecting other things, the faith of Christians in the perpetuity of the Gospel on earth might, many times over, in the history of the church, have been reasonably pronounced absurd. It is not, indeed, on any grounds of common philosophy, that we can at any time build a confident faith in the perpetuity of a system of truth like that of the Bible, in a world like this. Influences are constantly operating against the success of such a system in such a world, which no human power can withstand. The strong affinities of the human heart are against it. Powerful combinations of the selfish interests of men would be promoted by its destruction. There are open and avowed, as well as secret enemies to it, who are not few in number nor feeble in power. It is a historical fact, not always remembered, that the time has never yet been, when

the relative strength of Christianity on the one hand, and of false religions on the other, has been such as to furnish, in itself alone, any ground of hope that the Christian religion could ever become prevalent in this world.

The incredulity of multitudes respecting the probable success of Christian missions, is not unphilosophical, if we leave out of account the revealed purposes of God. The nature of the case, and all history, would combine to discourage the Christian church from any further effort to extend itself beyond the limits of Christian lands, if we might not repose in an everlasting decree that God's Word shall accomplish that to which He has sent it. All that has been achieved in spreading the Gospel through the world, has been done, not by might nor by power, as the world understands it. It has been done in modes which have constantly brought to view Divine interposition. Said an eminent English philanthropist, in reviewing his own career of almost unparalleled difficulty and success: "The experience of my life is, that events always go right when undertaken in the spirit of prayer. I have found assistance given and obstructions removed, in ways which convinced me that some *secret* power had been at work." Now this single thought is the germ of the history of Christian missions. From the beginning of the enterprise till this day, the most rational philosophy of the success of missions has been plainly this, that some secret force has sustained and carried on, to repeated victories, an apparently *hopeless* conflict. This is the impression which the history of missions would make upon a philosopher, who should come calmly to the study of that history, with no prepossessions to satisfy and no theory to defend. Set aside confidence in this *secret* power, and never was a tale of romance more visionary than this resolve of the Christian church to take possession of the world. It is no marvel that mere statesmen have reasoned against it, and mere scholars have lamented the waste of mind it involves, and mere philanthropists have scouted it, and mere wits have lampooned it, and mere churchmen have denounced it as a disgrace to the intelligence of a Christian age. The notorious sarcasm of Sydney Smith against the English missionaries in India, that they were "little detachments of maniacs" sent out to command the allegiance of a hundred millions of men, is no more than sober truth, if no decree of God lies at the foundation of the Christian theory of missions. It is, on that supposition, an expression of only the honest contempt of common sense.

A similar view must, in truth, be taken of all the reasonings of

infidelity against the perpetuity of the Christian church as it now exists. Such reasonings are not singular. On their platform of reasoning, infidels are right in their predictions. Their logic is in the main sound, and their conclusion irresistible, to a mind that considers cautiously the actual condition of the Christian church, and the obvious tendencies of human nature. It is true that in the natural course of things, without the constant intervention of a Divine purpose, the Christian religion *must* be overpowered. It must be beaten down by the storms of selfishness which incessantly rock this world. To speak in the very significant phraseology of the infidel argument, there is no *chance* for the preservation of such a system of truth in such a world. No, there *is* no *chance*. It is in opposition to all the *chances* of success, that God's *purpose* has thus far been accomplished in the preaching of His truth. To illustrate the position here affirmed, let attention be directed to one or two very familiar periods in the history of the Gospel, when the approaching dissolution of the Christian church has seemed to human view to be demonstrated. Such a period was that in which our Redeemer was crucified. It was then a matter of confident calculation by the enemies of the Gospel, that the disturbance which our Lord had created, was forever at an end. The morally certain prospect was, that his few dispirited followers would be dispersed, and the new religion would never be heard of again. What was it that preserved the church and her faith then, in the hour of her feebleness? Not the powers of this world; a feebler and more fainthearted band of men never clung together. Not an array of wealth or learning; they had neither. Not even the sympathies of the common human heart; they had no more bitter foe than these. Napoleon confessed that all his knowledge of the world was baffled, by the problem of the rise of the Christian church. He could not understand how a Power of such a character and with such a beginning, should have become mightier than those armies with which he had trampled upon nations. And it is to this day a problem which infidelity has not solved, how the Gospel of Christ rose up from the foot of the cross where its Founder perished in disgrace, and without martial power, without riches, without learning, and without even the sympathy of the masses, made its way to the seats of Empire, and created an era in the reckoning of time. Upon all the ordinary calculations of human judgment, uninfluenced by faith in God's purposes, the Gospel ought then and there to have sunk into the grave in ignominy, and the name of Jesus of Nazareth should have been heard of no more.

To mention but one other illustration of the particular now under review, let it be observed as confirmed by the history of the corruption of the Christian church. There was no event of the future, on which the secret infidel philosophy of the age preceding Luther, could have calculated with more reasonable confidence, than on the approaching downfall of Christianity. We cannot, indeed, but respect the sagacity of the French Infidels of the last century — reasoning as they did, chiefly upon the representations made to them of Christianity by the Papal church — we cannot but respect their sagacity in judging that Christianity must die. The Papal system was truth corrupted by contact with human nature. As such, it had reached its zenith, and, by the laws which regulate the history of all corruptions of truth, it must change its form, and give place to something which the human mind had not worn out. Aside from the explicit purpose of God to perpetuate His truth, Infidelity, be it repeated, is right in its prediction of the result, that the Christian religion will sooner or later die out of the world, and the church become extinct. Thus it is, that the purpose of God in the preaching of His Word is illustriously achieved, in opposition to the most promising plans of men for its defeat. The existence of a Christian church on the earth to-day, is proof of the Divinity of the Power that sustains it.

This subject presents itself in still another aspect of its relations, which may be expressed in the fact, that the purpose of God in the proclamation of the Gospel is often accomplished in *concealment*, beneath its apparent failure in the view of men. The Gospel often falls upon unwilling ears and hardened hearts. Its most sublime truths are often preached to the worst of men. Probably, the extreme of human guilt in this world, has been reached by men who have been hardened under the preaching of Christian truth. It has been often remarked, that in no part of the world are so many avowed Atheists to be found as in Christian lands. Often, of the vast multitude of the moral and reverent believers in the existence of a God, and in the authority of his Word, it must be admitted that, to all human appearance, preaching falls powerlessly upon them. It is the lament of many a preacher. It is the dark cloud which sometimes hangs over the ministry of a lifetime. Seasons occur, also, when this is the wide-spread lamentation of devoted Christians throughout a country. Men cannot see clearly, that the Gospel is actually achieving anything worthy of the power it claims to possess, or of its history in better times. The Word of God seems to return

to him void. No visible purpose is accomplished. Yet in every such case, God *has* a purpose which never fails.

Since this is the aspect of this subject which is of chief interest, so far as it concerns the ordinary labors of the Christian pulpit, several things in illustration of it deserve to be noticed. And first, it is an obvious truth which preachers have frequent occasion to recall, that that which seems to be a useless presentation of the Gospel, may be effective at a subsequent period of time. Visible effects, here as elsewhere, are often remote from their causes. The instructions of the Sabbath School, given to a thoughtless boy, are developed in the Christian maturity of the man. The truth which, at one time, only exasperates a hearer's heart against God, is by that very result made the means of disclosing to him his depravity; and thus humbling him before God. Views of truth which, at one time, are passed by as common-place, other circumstances and later years revive with new power. Dr. Chalmers owed his conversion, apparently, not to the fidelity of his Christian parents, not to the preaching of eloquent divines, not even to the twelve years of his own ministry which preceded the great change in his experience, but to the providence of God which laid him for several weeks upon a sick bed. Yet, doubtless, that occurrence was only the magnifying medium, which intensified the convictions of thirty years.

Many a Christian can distinctly recall occasions during his early life, when a truth was fastened in his conscience as a nail in a sure place; a truth which from that hour he never forgot, which never lost its power over him, which eventually bore an important part among the instruments of his salvation.

It has been remarked by one who has had much experience in revivals of religion that, so far as his observation had extended, almost every revival left undeveloped good behind it, in the form of impressions made by the Spirit of God, on the minds of many who did not immediately give evidence of having entered on the Christian life, but whom God led to repentance in subsequent years. They seemed to have withstood His grace and to have been forsaken. But afterwards, the truths then impressed upon them worked silently in their souls, and were at length made efficient in their conversion. Thus it is, that that which seems to have been preached in vain, receives from God its secret commission.

This view leads us to observe again, that, when the presentation of the Gospel appears in the main to be fruitless, great good is often accomplished by it *indirectly*. It would be in place here, to observe

some of the secondary results of the Gospel in its influence on society ; that it affects favorably the physical comfort, the sound morals, the intellect, and the tastes of men who are not seen to come under its saving power. But a more valuable kind of indirect agency is exerted in cases where, for a season, but few comparatively are brought under the saving influence of truth, but those *few* are made the signal means of a much wider usefulness. The humble tailor at Arnsby, to whom Robert Hall attributed an important influence upon the development of his character, was a more honored servant of God than many whose fame is in all the churches. Few comparatively were the spiritual converts under our Saviour's ministry. It was He whom Isaiah saw in prophetic vision, burdened by the apparent failure of his ministry, and whom he heard exclaiming in lamentation : " Who hath believed our report ? " So far as concerns the direct results of His ministry in the conversion of men, He was a less successful preacher than Paul. Yet the few who were saved by his ministrations, became apostles and prophets. It is thus that many a preacher who has faithfully labored for Christ, though for the most part unsuccessful to human view, has exerted a prospective influence over the wider successes of the few who have been saved by his instrumentality. Of many such unsuccessful, disappointed, discouraged ministers, it may be said : " There are last which shall be first."

Some there are, whose apparent success is so meagre, that they, and perhaps their friends also, question at last the wisdom of their choice in entering the ministry. They are not eloquent. They are slow of speech and of a slow tongue. Their voice never holds in suspense charmed thousands. The " bees " did not " drop honey " upon their lips, as they lay in the cradle. At first from necessity, and at length from choice, they seek out the solitary places of the land as the fields of their labor. Even there, they appear to human view to be ill adapted to their work. Ruder men than they, despise their refined virtues. Ignorant men assail their meek wisdom. Brethren whose zeal is without knowledge, rebuke their unostentatious fidelity. Perhaps the best years of their lives are spent in the apparently vain effort, to vindicate the simplicity of the Gospel against a perverted popular taste. Good men among their parishioners are silent, while bad men plot mischief against them, because they will not degrade their pulpits into mere market stalls, and because the soul of a true-hearted preacher cannot *transmigrate* into the form of a political manager. They, meanwhile, have no far-sighted policy. They are not *keen* men. They do not lift up, nor cry, neither is their voice

heard in the streets. They have long since learned to merge the question of mere professional success in that of an humble discharge of present duty. Theirs is the dignity of unconscious wisdom. Their labor is in the dark. They remind us of those miners whose days are spent under ground, and who from youth to old age scarcely see broad daylight. Yet an unseen eye is upon these buried pastors. They preach the preaching that God bids them, and they do preach with power. A few choice spirits, unknown like themselves to the great world, and yet acquainted with God, do spring in response to their words. The best affections of the best Christians among their people do cling to them. To such they *are* eloquent, 'beyond all Greek, all Roman fame.' Through these few who have power with God, their work is destined to live. No human wisdom may be able to tell how; but it will live. It *may* live, through the agency of some Christian mother whose intellect such a pastor has instructed, whose tastes he has refined, whose conscience he has enlightened, and whose heart he has warmed, and who pours all the treasures he has given her into the training, for a few infantile years, of a son for whom her dying faith is, that his voice shall yet be heard on a pentecostal day on the banks of the Ganges, or of a daughter whom a crown of martyrdom awaits in Central Africa. It *may* live in the labors of a young man whom such a pastor once carried in his bosom as a chosen lamb of his flock, and whom at length he is the means of sending into the honorable places of the ministry of our own land; and who will one day come on a pilgrimage to the grave of that pastor as to the grave of a father, and will say: "I owe to that man, more than I ever gained from the schools. He it was who taught me how to preach. He formed my tastes for the pulpit. He taught me to reverence my work. He made me bow down and tremble at the thought of it. Yet he taught me, too, to trust. He breathed into me that spirit of *repose*, without which a Christian preacher is as a reed shaken by the wind. I expect that I, and the souls whom God has given me, shall praise Him forever for the *creation* of that man."

The "plain preacher" who was instrumental in delivering John Owen from despair, may have been one of those mourning pastors who watch over an apparently unthrifty flock. Perhaps he often doubted the validity of his "call" to the sacred service. He may have often prayed with tears on a Sabbath morning, that he might not be permitted to put forth his poor hand to the ark of God, unbidden. That unpolished sermon of his to John Owen, on "little faith," may

have been the fruit of his own struggles for repose in duty. He may have chosen it, in preaching before those disappointed *spectators*, that he might strengthen his own drooping heart. Perhaps, if he could have learned its effect on that solitary hearer to whom God had sent it, he would have deemed it (as one of our New England fathers did a similar occurrence) as an occasion of devout thanksgiving, worthy to be placed on record as constituting an epoch in his life, that, after seven years of unrequited toil, God had at length condescended to give him, even him — *one* soul. What then would have been the emotions of that unknown preacher, if he could have looked forward through one short life, and seen the results of Owen's ministry? There is many a dispirited minister who might safely be exhorted to believe of his work in life, as Wordsworth said of his: "I perform it, in the full assurance that it will be unpopular, and yet in the full assurance that it will be immortal."

It may be observed still further, that, where the proclamation of the truth seems to be in vain, much good is often done which escapes a proper appreciation, because, from its very nature, it cannot be traced to *specific* occasions. The effects of preaching which appear in the religious growth of Christians, in their confirmation in holiness, and in their comfort in affliction, are not easily traced back to the particular occasions which have given them birth. No minister will wisely esteem these effects as among the least of the fruits of the Gospel. Yet how difficult is it to analyze a single Christian character, and to trace its growth, so as to attribute to each agency which God has honored in forming it, the proper share of the result. Let any Christian recall his own experience, for a period of a few years, and inquire by what instruments his graces have been preserved and quickened and made to expand. He will find that it has not been by any one sudden and overpowering impulse, given to his heart at any known hour or moment. It has been by an influence here and an influence there; by a thought suggested in a prayer-meeting, and an inference in a sermon; by an hour of sympathy with an afflicted brother, or an affliction of his own; by a view of truth impressed by a stranger in the pulpit, or an inquiry by a bright child at home; a thousand events, discourses, prayers, passages from the Word of God, and little nameless incidents of experience, have all been mingled, and no human mind can separate them so as to allot to each its place in the common work. We are told that the tone of a bell depends in part upon the imperceptible vibrations of the atmosphere, at the time of its manufacture, when, in the moments of fusion, the metal

is settling in the mould. So is it with a Christian character. Powers unknown and unthought of, and circumstances soon and long forgotten, and occasions scarcely observed in their passing, may give to it that tone which cannot be described and the cause of which cannot be defined, and yet which shall distinguish it forever, as one star differeth in glory from another.

Another view to be taken of instances in which the presentation of the Gospel seems to be for the time in vain, is, that much is often done by the *restraining* influences of God's Word, where this is all the result, apparently, that follows from it. That bad men are not worse than they are, that good men are preserved from apostasy, that a healthful restraint is thrown upon the downward tendency of human nature, are always owing to the blessing of God upon his truth. "Sometimes a spiritual shepherd has had no success in aggressive movements, but his great and only honor is to have guarded his flock from the wolves, and to say: 'Those whom thou gavest me, I have kept, and none of them is lost.'" No human mind can know the strength of that power which is requisite to achieve even these results. To *hold back* a lost world from the last possible extreme of guilt, may be an exercise of moral omnipotence, second only to that of restoring such a world to sinless obedience. The disclosures of the day when the secrets of hearts shall be revealed, may show that "the exceeding greatness of God's power" has been put forth in the merely *conservative* success of preaching.

Once more, it should be observed, to complete this view, that, when the truth is presented in vain, so far as the salvation of its hearers is concerned, a design of God is still accomplished, by the *offer* of salvation. We are taught that honor is reflected upon the character of God, even by unavailing offers of mercy. The offers of mercy accomplish a purpose that is worthy of God, and therefore worthy of the desire of his people. It is a purpose honorable, not merely to the justice of God, but chiefly to His mercy. Yes, it is the *mercy* of God which will be chiefly illustrated by the history of the Gospel as presented to men who are ultimately lost. The mercy of God to them will at last render even this fearful chapter in the history of the pulpit, an illustration of God's exceeding glory. The preaching of the Gospel will be *evidence* to the universe, on points of incalculable importance to God's moral government. It will prove that that government is worthy of confidence in the most mysterious acts of its administration. It will prove that, in that administration, the symmetry of God's character is preserved, in that His love is not over-

borne by His justice, nor His justice by His power; for it will prove, that lost men, in the exercise of their own ability — an ability which God pleased to create, and which therefore it is His pleasure to honor — have destroyed themselves. It will prove, that they have perished in despite of God's desire that they should live. It will prove, that they have chosen their way to death, in opposition to well-known provisions of salvation. It will prove, that they have withstood displays of God's character which have filled all other eyes with tears, and melted all other hearts. It will prove, that they have cunningly discovered their way through all the intricacies and entanglements by which God, in the profusion of His love, would have discouraged their march to despair. It will prove, that they have taken the kingdom of darkness by violence, contending against efforts to save them, which have filled holy minds with amazement. It will prove, that they have crowded their way through to perdition, fought against difficulties, broken down barriers, hurled obstacles out of their path, *struck back* the pierced hand which would have snatched them from the burning. This is the testimony which a Christian preacher unrolls before the universe, in vindication of God's ways, with those hearers of the Gospel who are not saved.

This may seem to be an unlovely view of the history of the Gospel, especially as exhibited in its presentation to those whose life of unpardoned sin has been characterized by great gentleness of temperament, or has been filled with great ignorance or sore temptation. But charity must be truthful. There is in human character, however gentle in appearance, or pardonable by a human standard, something that strikes us with terror, when its result is — a rejection of Christ. This may be done beneath the pressure of a corrupt education; done, at the bidding of depraved ignorance; done, under the force of unfriendly circumstances; done, by moral powers which are scarcely more than infantile; done, beneath the silvery veil of a life beautiful externally; done, far down in the almost unconscious depth of a deceived heart; still — *it is done*; and man is fearfully free in the deed, after all. In such an exercise of his freedom, there is something ruthless, something *mad*, however gentle in the seeming. Rude language best becomes it. Emblems which shock our sensibilities, set it forth most truthfully. We may, indeed, have no spirit left in us now, when we contemplate this part of the great commission. Yet, we cannot refuse to see, that, in the ages to come, and beneath the light of God's throne, and to the vision of eyes opened to look into the deep things of God, this preaching of Christ to those

who shall finally reject Him, shall appear to have accomplished one of the everlasting purposes of God's love. Christian preachers shall be seen to have been the instruments of its accomplishment. To the height of this great argument, they shall justify the ways of God to men.

ARTICLE IX.

BRETSCHNEIDER'S VIEW OF THE THEOLOGY OF SCHLEIERMACHER.

Translated from Bretschneider's *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, p. 93 etc. 4th edition.

THOUGH Schleiermacher never acknowledged himself a disciple of Schelling, his system has so close a relationship to the philosophy of that distinguished writer, that it is impossible not to perceive its influence. The fundamental idea, which is the starting point of his system, is his conception of religion. He maintains that religion, or, according to the expression which he usually prefers, piety, the pious affection, does not consist in knowledge, or action; but in feeling, or in a certain determination of feeling. In his view, moreover, feeling and immediate self-consciousness are identical. By feeling, says he, I understand immediate self-consciousness, as it occupies principally, though not exclusively, any portion of time, and occurs, for the most part, under the opposite forms of the agreeable and the disagreeable. He uses, therefore, feeling, consciousness, emotion as interchangeable expressions.

The common attribute of all pious feelings, and consequently, in his view, the essence of religion, is this, that a man is conscious to himself of being absolutely dependent; that is, that he feels himself dependent on the Absolute [God]. This he explains as follows: There is in man no pure self-consciousness; that is, none, in which a man is conscious of his "I" by itself. The "I" always presents itself in relation to something else, to the "not-I." Now either the feeling remains herein [in relation to the "not-I"] always entirely the same in the course or constant recurrence of the relation to the "not-I," and thus indicates the relation of dependence; or it is