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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

Two of the parables, beyond all the rest, create difficulty in our day. The one is the parable of the Unjust Steward. The other is the parable of the Unjust Judge.

The difficulty of the parable of the Unjust Steward is ethical. It is a question of right conduct. The lord of the steward commended his skill in getting out of a tight corner, though it was by adding iniquity to iniquity. And that is intelligible, if the lord was an easy-going man of the world, with a sense of humour.

But our Lord recommends his behaviour for imitation. That is a different matter. The steward made friends for himself by an unrighteous use of the money at his disposal. See, says our Lord, that you make friends also, who when the extremity arrives will harbour you, and see that you use that same unrighteous mammon for the making of them.

Thus the moral of the parable stands. Or seems to stand. Thus it is read by the vast multitudes of its readers. The difficulty is very plain, and few are they that get over it.

But serious as the difficulty of the parable of the Unjust Steward is, more serious is the difficulty

of the parable of the Unjust Judge. For it is a religious difficulty.

The shameless conduct of a callous, indolent, indulgent Eastern official towards an oppressed and helpless widow is held up as illustrative of the way in which God deals with those who come to Him in prayer. It is a lesson in importunity. The translators of the Revised Version entitle it the parable of the Importunate Widow. As this unjust judge had to be pestered by the widow till he was afraid of being beaten black and blue—to use his own vulgar expression—so we are to batter at the ear of God until He is compelled to do us the justice that we desire.

Was there ever daring teacher who dared to teach like this? How utterly does it put to flight the whole array of modern exegetes who bid us be content with the teaching and example of Jesus. If we are content with the teaching and example of Jesus, we are face to face, in these two parables, with teaching that is subversive of the most modest morality and the most elementary religion. And there is no getting over it in that way. Every device that the ingenious expositor hits upon leaves the difficulty in both parables just where it was.

For 'unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without, all

things are done in parables : that seeing they may see, and not perceive ; and hearing they may hear, and not understand ; lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them' (Mk 4¹¹). First you, then the mystery of the Kingdom. First the follower of Christ, caught by Himself into fellowship and following, and then the seeing that sees and the hearing that understands. First the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and then the absurdity of supposing that God avenges His own elect after the manner of the unjust judge.

'And shall not God avenge his elect, which cry to him day and night, and he is long suffering over them? I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily.' Yes, speedily ; for He is avenging them all the time. 'Before they call, I will answer ; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear'—that is God. It is they that did not know. The answer did not come as they looked for it, and they thought no answer came at all.

They looked very likely for material things, and He gave them spiritual. 'Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me.' 'Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?' And then, 'Take heed, and beware of covetousness.'

Christ's own importunate widow (we may surmise that she was a widow) came to Him out of the Syrophenician country. What are you to make of His way with her? The example of Jesus here is as difficult as His teaching there. If you have not Jesus first you can make nothing of it, twist and turn it as you will. But, knowing Jesus, you know that He answered her speedily ; you know that He was answering her all the time. Before she called He had answered ; while she was yet speaking He had heard.

If we had but faith. It is so difficult to believe that we are being avenged, while the enemy and oppressor is upon us. It is so difficult to believe

that the prayer is heard while the wire is on its way from the War Office. 'Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?' (Lk 18⁸). Not, assuredly, if the faith He looks for is faith in some word of His—faith in His teaching, faith in His example. But if it is faith in Him?

In Archdeacon FIRMINGER'S *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, noticed among the Literature of the month, there is an added Note on 'The Alphabet of the Universe.'

It is some phrase, as an American citizen would say. And not only in itself but also as a translation. The Greek is τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. The Authorized Version has 'the rudiments of the world' with 'elements' in the margin. The Revised Version is the same, both text and margin. What right has Dr. FIRMINGER to translate it 'the alphabet of the universe'?

That is the meaning of the word in classical Greek. It is the word for the letters of the alphabet. 'Have you learned your letters yet?' A Greek visitor would ask: 'Have you learned your *stoicheia*?' And to translate that 'rudiments,' is to suggest the Latin primer, a distinctly later stage in the child's painful experience. And as for 'elements'—that signifies that the child has already become a philosopher.

Perhaps it was because St. Paul speaks of philosophy in this very verse that the word 'elements' occurred to its first translators. The verse is, 'Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the elements of the world (AVm.), and not after Christ' (Col 2⁸). And no doubt the ancient sophist had a way of using phrases like 'the elements of the world' to recommend his philosophy and hide his empty pretence. But it is St.

Paul that uses the phrase here. What does he mean by it?

Archdeacon FIRMINGER leads us towards the meaning by steps. First he gives us Lightfoot's interpretation. Lightfoot looked at the phrase as it occurs in the Epistle to the Galatians, and thought, 'with a few of the fathers,' that it meant 'elementary teaching.' But, says Dr. FIRMINGER, 'if "elementary teaching" had been the Apostle's meaning, we should have expected to find as the genitive of object some such word as "principles," "teaching" or "instruction," but this is what we do not find.' St. Paul speaks of the alphabet of the world, not of the alphabet of education.

The next step is to the great majority of the Fathers—a long step and a backward one. To the Fathers the *stoicheia* were the stars, the stars as marking the seasons. And what St. Paul condemned was the custom of observing festivals and new moons and Sabbaths. But Lightfoot very properly says: 'It seems to be much more in accordance with the prevailing tone of Alexandrian theology than with the language and teaching of St. Paul.'

The third step is to Professor Peake. Professor Peake believes that St. Paul is speaking of personal beings—the very same indeed as elsewhere he calls 'principalities and powers,' and 'the rulers of this darkness.' And to that interpretation Dr. FIRMINGER is not a little attracted. 'For the tendency of the time was to think of the Eternal God as remote from the life of the universe and thus to find a place for the activities of legions of created spirits who were supposed to inhabit and control the forces of nature in general and the heavenly bodies in particular. So in the Book of Jubilees (ii. 2) we read of "Angels (of the spirit) of fire," "Angels of the spirit of the winds," of the snow, cold, heat, etc., and of the winter, spring, summer, and autumn. In the Book of Enoch we meet with these "leaders of the heads of thousands who are placed over the whole crea-

tion and over the stars," and are under the direction of the Angel Uriel, who entrusts Enoch with the secrets of the heavenly bodies in order that he may hand down a true tradition as to the right observance of what in the fragments of a Zadokite work are spoken of as

"The hidden things
His holy sabbaths and His glorious festivals,
His righteous testimonies and His true ways,
And the desires of His will."

But Dr. FIRMINGER cannot accept it. For the 'weak and beggarly elements,' as St. Paul (in our translation) called the *stoicheia* in Gal 4⁹, are the days and months and seasons and years themselves, not the heavenly hosts which have the control of them. What St. Paul warns his hearers against is a superstition with which we have been made very familiar through the recent study of religion. They had been accustomed to the observance of lucky days. Their whole calendar was a succession of days that were lucky or unlucky. They may have associated these days with gods or spirits, but for the greater number there was nothing in it but a superstitious and degrading belief in one day as more or less propitious than another.

Were the early Christians liable to return to this superstition, and are the Christians of to-day beyond it? Says Archdeacon FIRMINGER: 'It is only fair to observe that Christians, when they neglect the essentials of the life in Christ, often become victims to crude superstitions about lucky days, numbers, etc. A woman, who had not made her Communion for years, once told the present writer that she could not undergo an operation the doctors had prescribed as urgent, since "it would never do to be operated on in Advent."'

The miracles which have the most precarious hold at present are the Virgin Birth and the Ascension. They are both in the Creed, and it is

because they are in it that the recitation of the Creed is contested.

Now, it is not their incredibility that gives them a precarious existence. It is the poverty of the Scripture testimony on their behalf. In particular, no account of the Virgin Birth or of the Ascension is found in St. John.

Leave the Virgin Birth alone. Come to the Ascension. Why does St. John give no account of it? There are two reasons.

The first reason is that he has already made the Ascension inevitable. He has told of the Word that came into the world. He has said that the Angels of God ascend and descend on the Son of man—an improbable honour if He Himself is not to ascend. He has stated explicitly that 'no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.'

The other reason is that the value of the Ascension is to those who see. No description of it, no statement of the fact of it, would be of any use to one who did not see and believe.

During the days which fell between the Resurrection and the Ascension, Jesus appeared only to His believing disciples. Physically He could have appeared to others. He could have appeared to Pilate and to Caiaphas, as we are told He ought to have done. But physically *and* spiritually He would appear to none but those whom He had chosen. For they alone could see and believe. To appear physically only was not to secure belief. It never is. 'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rise from the dead.' It is to make unbelief at once more confirmed and more criminal.

Now, in St. John's day, in the day when the Fourth Gospel was written, the difficulties of the Ascension had been thoroughly discussed. To

add to the discussion one more statement of the fact was useless. The statement was already there, in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts, which were in all men's hands. If the readers of the Fourth Gospel did not believe that Jesus came down from heaven they would not be moved by a statement of fact that He returned to heaven. As it was with Jesus and Caiaphas, so was it with John and the Jews—the physical demonstration was nothing. One thing only was of any value. 'What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing.'

Now turn to the *Romance of Eternal Life* (Dent; 5s. net). It is a book written by Mr. Charles GARDNER, the same who wrote that singular revelation of the genius of William Blake, called *Vision and Vesture*. In the new book will be found all that has just been said about the Ascension.

No part of the Bible, Old Testament or New, is more perplexing to the modern mind than the early chapters of the Book of Acts.

They open abruptly with the supreme perplexity of the Day of Pentecost. They proceed to the performance of miracles—miracles of judgment, swift and unmerciful, as the death of Ananias and Sapphira; or of resurrection from the dead, so isolated and unexplained as that of Dorcas. They tell us of spiritual forces like prayer and praise shaking a material building. They assert the bestowal of Spiritual Gifts, gifts of the most extraordinary kind, and not on select individuals but on the whole multitude of the disciples.

Nor is that all. They claim that all those phenomena are due to the direct action of that same Jesus who had just been crucified. And (most incomprehensible of all) they assume throughout that everything takes place in the presence of supra-mundane beings, some of whom

are friendly and helpful, while others are implacably hostile.

It is all so real every time we read the record ; it is all so unreal the moment we return to our modern life. What are we to do with it ?

We can ignore it for a time. But we cannot ignore it all the time. Still less can we set our modern life up against it and reject as fictitious all that is out of order with our own religious experience. There is a third way. It has been chosen by a Cambridge scholar, at one time Chaplain of Clare College, now Vicar of Ham in Surrey, the Rev. J. R. PRIDIE, M.A. Mr. PRIDIE's book is entitled *The Spiritual Gifts* (Scott ; 5s. net).

Mr. PRIDIE accepts the early chapters of Acts as historical. For, let it be distinctly understood, they have (apart from their contents) as good right to be called historical as any narrative in history. And, accepting the chapters as historical, he proceeds to consider their contents.

Now, when he turns to consider carefully their contents, the first thing that claims his attention is the fact that throughout these early chapters of Acts the Church is not the Church as the modern mind conceives it. The fundamental idea of the Church there, as in all the New Testament, 'is that of a corporate life lived in definite conscious relation to God and in definite conscious relations of mutual brotherhood among its members. It is an organism rather than an organization, and as an organism the law of its being is the expression of that Divine life with which it is endowed and by which it lives.'

Those are the very first sentences of Mr. PRIDIE's book. They carry the whole book behind them. They open the way to the understanding of the strange phenomena which are found in those strange early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

For if the Church is an organism, a corporate life, the carrier of the power which proceeds from the risen Redeemer, two things become intelligible. First, the victory of the Risen Redeemer must be made good on earth where the Church has its visible sphere of activity ; and, secondly, it must be made good in those heavenly places where the principalities and powers are. In Mr. PRIDIE's words, 'the living Church of the living Christ has a double function to perform. She has to carry on Christ's work of setting free the souls and bodies of men on earth, and by so doing she has to act as the organ of revelation to supra-mundane beings.' In the Epistles (for that which is taken for granted in the Acts is explicitly declared in the Epistles) nothing is more clear or remarkable than 'the consciousness of the "Supernatural," which is continually making itself felt. On the one hand, the Christ fulfilling Himself through the Church : "As the body is one and hath many members, so also is Christ" (1 Cor. xii. 12) ; on the other, part of that "fulfilling" is the making known *through the Church* "to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (*i.e.* making known to the spiritual sphere in which there are evil powers as well as good) "the manifold wisdom and the eternal purpose of God in Christ Jesus."

Now when the Church turned to consider her fitness for this double task she found herself appropriately equipped. First of all she discovered that the necessary *power* had been given her—not the authority only, but the power. And next, she discovered that she had been endowed with special spiritual gifts. These gifts included such 'natural' endowments as teaching and exhorting ; but they also included such 'supernatural' endowments as exorcism and the working of miracles.

Those Spiritual Gifts (of which a full and detailed list is found for the first time in the Epistles of St. Paul) were given in order that the Church might perform her double task of antagonizing the spiritual hosts of wickedness above, and of persuading men to embrace Jesus Christ below. But

no clear line is drawn between the natural gifts and the supernatural. It is not even that they merge at their margin. The most supernatural gift, to our way of thinking, is close to the most natural. They serve their purpose, each gift according to its opportunity; but that purpose is not at one time natural and at another supernatural. Every act of the Christ-possessed Church is at once natural and supernatural because every act is directed to a devil-ridden humanity.

For 'the world-rulers of this darkness' do not come into the light of common day. Their hosts are invisible to mortal eyes. The fight they put up is usually through human beings. The Church of Christ has to meet 'the wiles of the devil' in men and women. Some of these men and women are manifestly 'possessed'—the nearest approach to a fair fight that the heavenly hosts will offer. The greater number are simply sinners. They are alarmingly active or provokingly passive. And it is through their opposition or inertia that the hosts of wickedness maintain the struggle.

Now it is undeniable that the belief in spiritual personalities other than the one living and true God is extremely difficult for the modern mind. Mr. PRIDIE knows it. His own mind is modern enough to feel it. The difficulty takes two forms.

One form is religious. It is 'the deep-seated idea that in the process of mental and moral evolution we have reached a stage which warrants us (if indeed it does not insist) in discarding primitive beliefs as definitely belonging only to the earlier stages of man's development and definitely to be discarded by more enlightened folk. At one end of the scale are the affirmations of animism, at the other the negations of such systems of belief as Christian Science.' To this Mr. PRIDIE answers shortly that 'the persistence in one form or another of the belief in spirits would seem to challenge the validity of this idea as a sound canon of progress.'

The other form in which the difficulty presses is theological. It is difficult for Western theology 'to realize any kind of limitation to Divine power, or to make room in our thought for any other personalities besides the Deity and ourselves. It is due to this attitude that any discussion of our subject has for long been ruled out of court. Science has been called in to supplement by her doctrine of natural laws the defects of theological discussion.' 'But,' Mr. PRIDIE replies, 'the newer philosophy of vitalism has shown that natural laws are not the whole account of the matter—that there is a *causa causans* which has still to be taken into account, and this has directed our thought towards new ideas of personal and spiritual elements in the development of human nature. And, theologically, there has been a welcome movement towards re-examining our conceptions of the attributes of Deity in the light of the broader *παντοκράτωρ* of the Nicene Creed rather than of the narrower and less adequate Omnipotens of the Western Creeds.'

These answers are short, but they are probably sufficient. For science no longer says that this is impossible and that incredible. Brought up sharply against the claims of the New Psychology, the scientific observer has abandoned the materialistic assurance of an earlier generation. He is as ready now as any theologian to say that all things are possible to him that believeth. Mr. PRIDIE'S answers are at least sufficient to send one to the records themselves.

And when we return to the records themselves we find that there is one fact of most unmistakable import. It is the fact of spiritual power. Ignore that fact and all the phenomena are isolated and unintelligible. Accept it and they fall into place.

For it is not a natural fact. The power which is so evident is not an intellectual or an emotional power. It does not come from the sub-consciousness of the men who have it. It comes from

without. It comes from above. They themselves said so. We see that it is so. They said that it was due to the direct influence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. We see that no other explanation accounts for it.

And when we see that the tremendous spiritual force which the early disciples possessed, a force which could manifest itself in sensibly shaking a building in which they were engaged together in prayer—when we understand that that force was the very living Lord Himself doing His work in and through His Body the Church, and doing it as certainly as when He went about doing good on earth—then we are able to realize the simplicity and inevitableness of their conviction that the warfare which they were sent to wage was not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places.

For that is the only warfare in which the Lord Jesus Christ ever engages. On earth He never fought with men—not even with the Pharisees, for all the denunciation with which He denounced them. The Pharisees were to be found in Jerusalem as elsewhere, and He included them when He said that He would fain have gathered her children together as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings. It was with the hosts of wickedness that His conflict was, and with them alone. At every turn in His ministry He was brought face to face with them. When He sent the Seventy through the villages of Judea He gave

them power to cast out demons, and He received them back with their proud surprise that even the devils had been subject to them through His name. And at that moment He summed up the aim of His whole life's service in the victory over Satan: 'I saw Satan as lightning fallen from heaven.'

If Jesus was working in the Church now He was working, as ever, to destroy the kingdom of Satan. The Church was there—there of His appointment—to see the prophecy of Satan's fall fulfilled! The earliest disciples undoubtedly recognized the bestowal of the Spiritual Gifts as equipment for a conflict that was spiritual. And when they went forth to exercise them they did not think of themselves as men pitted against other men; they thought of the Spirit of Christ within them arrayed against the spiritual forces of wickedness which used men only as their tools or victims. The lame man who lay at the Beautiful Gate was there by the power of the Evil One. As a man they as men could do nothing for him. But as the victim of Satan the Spirit of Christ could through them deliver him. Were Ananias and Sapphira struck down suddenly to be carried out dead? It was not Peter's word or act that did it. Ananias and Sapphira lied against the Holy Ghost. 'Peter simply revealed'—we quote Mr. PRIDIE here—'Peter simply revealed the enormity of the sin, and physical death came upon Ananias because he had himself killed that principle of spiritual life which would have been able to resist the onslaught of the King of Terrors.'

The Papyri and the New Testament.¹

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THERE can be little doubt that the rapid spread of Christianity in the first centuries of its existence

¹ This paper, which makes no claim to originality, but aims at indicating the way in which recent papyrological research has thrown light upon the New Testament, was read before a meeting of the Bible Studies Society at the University of Sheffield in November 1921.

was greatly helped by the presence of a universal language throughout the Eastern Mediterranean area.

The use of Greek as the official language of a large tract of the civilized world was due in the first place to the conquests of Alexander the Great. Alexander—though the story of his Hellenic de-