

Progressive Theology (April, 1888)

by C.H. Spurgeon

The sermon warns against the dangers of progressive theology, which seeks to update and improve the traditional Christian faith, and calls for a return to sound doctrine and Evangelical unity.

Scripture: Galatians 1:6

Topics: "Defense of the Gospel", "Progressive Theology"

Description

C.H. Spurgeon addresses the alarming trend of progressive theology, which he views as a dangerous deviation from the true gospel. He critiques those who openly embrace heretical beliefs, suggesting that many have long harbored these errors before publicly declaring them. Spurgeon emphasizes the importance of maintaining the integrity of the gospel, warning against the notion that it can be improved or altered by human wisdom. He calls for vigilance against the infiltration of false doctrines within the church and encourages believers to stand firm in their faith, even amidst widespread apostasy. Ultimately, he reassures the faithful that the battle against error is ongoing, but with God's help, truth will prevail.

Transcript

IN this age of progress, religious opinions move at railway speed. Within the last few weeks many have made an open advance of a very special kind; we say an open advance, for we suspect that secretly they had for a long time harbored the errors which now they have avowed. And what a revelation it is! Here, one sees a "Moderate" declaring his advance to "another gospel" in the boldest terms; and there, another, highly esteemed for his supposed love of the truth, stubbing it after the subtle manner of its most malicious foes.

While some of the most perverted cunningly endeavor to appear orthodox, others of a braver nature come out in their true colors, and astonish us with the glaring hue of their heresy. That which makes manifest is light; and, however much we may deplore the unwelcome discoveries of the present controversy, we ought to be thankful that they are made, for it is better for us to know where we are, and with whom we are associating. The idea of a progressive gospel seems to have fascinated many.

To us that notion is a sort of cross-breed between nonsense and blasphemy. After the gospel has been found effectual in the eternal salvation of untold multitudes, it seems rather late in the day to alter it; and, since it is the revelation of the all-wise and unchanging God, it appears somewhat audacious to attempt its improvement. When we call up before our mind's eye the gentlemen who have set themselves this presumptuous task, we feel half inclined to laugh; the case is so much like the proposal of moles to

improve the light of the sun.

Their gigantic intellects are to hatch out the meanings of the Infinite! We think we see them brooding over hidden truths to which they lend the aid of their superior genius to accomplish their development! Hitherto they have not hatched out much worth rearing. Their chickens are so much of the Roman breed, that we sometimes seriously suspect that, after all, Jesuitical craft may be at the bottom of this "modern thought." It is singular that, by the way of free-thought, men should be reaching the same end as others arrived at by the path of superstition.

Salvation by works is one distinctive doctrine of the new gospel: in many forms this is avowed and gloried in--not, perhaps, in exact words, but in declarations quite unmistakable. The Galatian heresy is upon us with a vengeance: in the name of virtue and morality, justification by faith and salvation by free grace are bitterly assailed. Equally a child of darkness is this New Purgatory. It is taught that men can escape if they neglect the great salvation. No longer is the call, "Today, if ye will hear his voice"; for the tomorrow of the next state will answer quite as well.

Of course, if men may be gradually upraised from sin and ruin in the world to come, common humanity would lead us to pray that the process may go on rapidly. We are hearing every now and again of "a night of prayers for the dead," among certain priests of the Establishment. Nor is it among Ritualists alone, or even mainly, for the other day, at a meeting for prayer, an eminent believer in this notion prayed heartily for the devil; and his prayer, upon the theory of the restitution of all the sinful, was most natural.

Prayers for the dead and prayers for the devil! Shades of Knox and Latimer, where are ye? How easy will it be to go from prayers for the dead to payment to good men for special supplications on their behalf! Of course if a devout person will spend an hour in praying a deceased wife out of her miseries, a loving husband will not let him exercise his supplications for nothing. It would be very mean of him if he did. "Purgatory Pick-purse," as our Protestant forefathers called it, is upon us again, having entered by the back-door of infidel speculation instead of by the front entrance of pious opinion.

Nor is this all; for our "improvers" have pretty nearly obliterated the hope of such a heaven as we have all along expected. Of course, the reward of the righteous is to be of no longer continuance than the punishment of the wicked. Both are described as "everlasting" in the same verse, spoken by the same sacred lips; and as the "punishment" is made out to be only "age-lasting," so must the "life" be. Worse even than this, if worse can be, it is taught by some of these "improvers" that even the blessed of the Father are by no means blessed overmuch; for, according to the latest information, even they will have to undergo a sort of purgatorial purification in the world to come.

There are degrees in the inventiveness of the nineteenth-century theologians; but, to our mind, it is the license given to this inventiveness, even when it is most moderate, which is the root of the whole mischief. What is to be taught next? And what next? Do men really believe that there is a gospel for each century? Or a religion for each fifty years? Will there be in heaven saints saved according to a score sorts of gospel? Will these agree together to sing the same song?

And what will the song be? Saved on different footings, and believing different doctrines, will they enjoy eternal concord, or will heaven itself be only a new arena for disputation between varieties of faiths? We shall, on the supposition of an ever-developing theology, owe a great deal to the wisdom of men. God may provide the marble; but it is man who will carve the statue. It will no longer be true that God has hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes; but the babes will be lost in

hopeless bewilderment, and carnal wisdom will have fine times for glorying.

Scientific men will be the true prophets of our Israel, even though they deny Israel's God; and instead of the Holy Spirit guiding the humble in heart, we shall see the enthronement of "the spirit of the age," whatever that may mean. "The world by wisdom knew not God," so says the apostle of the ages past; but the contrary is to be our experience nowadays. New editions of the gospel are to be excogitated by the wisdom of men, and we are to follow in the wake of "thoughtful preachers," whose thoughts are not as God's thoughts.

Verily this is the deification of man! Nor do the moderns shrink even from this. To many of our readers it may already be known that it is beginning to be taught that God himself is but the totality of manhood, and that our Lord Jesus only differed from us in being one of the first men to find out that he was God: he was but one item of that race, which, in its solidarity, is divine. It is thought to be mere bigotry to protest against the mad spirit which is now loose among us.

Pan-indifferentism is rising like the tide; who can hinder it? We are all to be as one, even though we agree in next to nothing. It is a breach of brotherly love to denounce error. Hail, holy charity! Black is white; and white is black. The false is true; the true is false; the true and the false are one. Let us join hands, and never again mention those barbarous, old-fashioned doctrines about which we are sure to differ. Let the good and sound men for liberty's sake shield their "advanced brethren"; or, at least, gently blame them in a tone which means approval.

After all, there is no difference, except in the point of view from which we look at things: it is all in the eye, or, as the vulgar say, "it is all my eye"! In order to maintain an open union, let us fight as for dear life against any form of sound words, since it might restrain our liberty to deny the doctrines of the Word of God! But what if earnest protests accomplish nothing, because of the invincible resolve of the infatuated to abide in fellowship with the inventors of false doctrine?

Well, we shall at least have done our duty. We are not responsible for success. If the plague cannot be stayed, we can at least die in the attempt to remove it. Every voice that is lifted up against Anythingarianism is at least a little hindrance to its universal prevalence. It may be that in some one instance a true witness is strengthened by our word, or a waverer is kept from falling; and this is no mean reward. It is true that our testimony may be held up to contempt; and may, indeed, in itself be feeble enough to be open to ridicule; but yet the Lord, by the weak things of the world, has overcome the mighty in former times, and he will do so again.

We cannot despair for the church or for the truth, while the Lord lives and reigns; but, assuredly, the conflict to which the faithful are now summoned is not less arduous than that in which the Reformers were engaged. So much of subtlety is mixed up with the whole business, that the sword seems to fall upon a sack of wool, or to miss its mark. However, plain truth will cut its way in the end, and policy will ring its own death-knell. Not with this man, or that Council, or that Union, are the lovers of the old gospel at war at this present; but with the whole body of unbelief which is now attempting to borrow the Christian name, and effect a settlement within Christian territory.

This spirit is in all the churches, more or less; indeed, it seems to be in the air. The prince of the power of the air is loosed in an extraordinary manner for a season, misleading even the godly, and triumphing greatly in those whose willing minds yield full assent to his deceitful teachings. On this account our fears are great for the Baptist churches, which have in former ages been the strongholds of the gospel of the

grace of God. Those communities which avowedly confess the truth of God can deal with the spirit of unbelief, at least in a measure; but those bodies of men which hold no settled doctrines, and make no profession of believing anything definite, are like houses with open doors, inviting the unclean spirit to enter, and take up his abode.

We have tried to deal with the spirit of error in its abstract form; but we have also recommended, as a practical action on the behalf of the Baptist Denomination (which we believe to be upon the whole sound in the faith), that it should accept an Evangelical basis. Its churches and Associations in most cases have such a basis; why not the Union which is made up of them? This question is to come before the Baptist Union at its next general meeting. Should the proposal of an Evangelical basis be carried out, we shall greatly rejoice, for it may be a rebuke to the incipient party of error, which has of late talked so exceeding loudly; but if this is not done, other and stronger measures must be taken, which will enable faithful men to bear their testimony without having it marred by their fellowship with evil.

The faithful will take steps to enable them to carry out practical work for the Lord, without the depressing suspicion that their zeal may, after all, be only building nests to be in the future occupied by the hatchers of false doctrine. It may be that, in the Baptist Denomination, the purifying process will be long and painful; but we trust that grace will be given to true believers to persevere till it is accomplished, or else to come forth from the baseless Union, and separate themselves for the defense of the truth of God.

We fear that the outlook for certain other denominations is not nearly so hopeful. In their case, what is wanted in the gracious remnant is "a larger hope" than they have at present, that even yet the forces of falsehood can be overcome, since the battle is the Lord's.

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