

# Our Strength and Our Weakness

by F.G. Allen

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith, restoration, and unity in the Christian life, while also acknowledging the weaknesses of the church and the need to correct them.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 16:13, Ephesians 4:15, Hebrews 11:1, Hebrews 11:34, 1 Peter 5:2

**Topics:** "Faith And Strength", "Church Restoration"

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## Description

F.G. Allen preaches about the strength that comes from faith, highlighting how individuals in the Bible were made strong out of weakness through their faith in God. He emphasizes the importance of a life of faith leading to growth and transformation. Allen discusses the elements of strength in their plea for restoration, focusing on the need to adhere to the original model of the Church as left by the Apostles. He also addresses the elements of weakness, such as losing sight of their distinctive plea, issues with church government, lack of co-operation in church work, and a need for personal consecration to the work.

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## Transcript

"Out of weakness were made strong."--Heb. xi:34.

HE religion of God has ever been a religion of faith. The faith of the Bible is a principle of action which governs the lives of men and brings them into submission to the divine will. A life of faith, therefore, is a life of growth. By faith men are out of weakness made strong. But this strength is not the work of a day. It is the result of a life. We are all babes before we are men.

In recording the many wonderful things which the ancients accomplished by faith, it is affirmed that out of weakness they were made strong. In noting the extreme weakness of some of the prominent characters of that age in the early stages of their life of faith, and the grand heroes which they finally became, we find much to encourage us in our struggles toward a higher life and a closer walk with God. We are thankful that God has given these examples for our imitation. Among these Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are prominent representatives. Abraham and Isaac were both so weak, even after they had been [238] in close communion with God, and had assurances of His protection, that they relied on human strategy rather than divine providence. They both prevaricated in regard to their wives. They made a deliberate effort to deceive. They seemed to think that their wives were too handsome to claim. The complaint is not now so common. Jacob supplanted his brother by deceiving his father, old and blind; and by a shrewd device managed to get most of the flock of his father-in-law. Yet out of such weakness these men developed by faith into moral and spiritual giants, whose names stand out on the sacred page worthy of

our profound reverence and sublime admiration. But this was the development of a long life. It is a grand mistake to suppose that Abraham was capable of doing, when called out of Ur of the Chaldees, what he afterwards did at the command of God.

Also in the lives of the Apostles we see the same development out of weakness into strength. Not only did they forsake their Master; but Peter, the boldest of the lot, even cursed and swore, and denied that he ever knew Him. But when possessed of a purer faith, they were all ready to go to the stake, and thanked God that they were worthy to suffer for Him whom they once deserted and denied.

In studying the elements of weakness and strength of God's ancient people, we pass by an easy transition to the study of those elements in His people now. Hence it is my purpose today to consider [239] the elements of strength and weakness as we understand them to exist among us as a religious people. This leads me to speak of what is generally denominated

#### OUR PLEA.

Whenever a people come before the world with a plea demanding its recognition, the world has a right to demand of them a reason for their claim. Hence we should be always ready to give a reason for the position we occupy in the religious world. The work in which we are engaged is generally called the Reformation, but sometimes, and more correctly, I think, the Restoration. But this depends largely on the point of view from which the work is considered. In presenting this plea today I shall speak first of its

#### ELEMENTS OF STRENGTH.

In considering the nature of our work as a people, I shall first mention what it is not, that we may the more clearly understand what it is. In doing this I shall be very brief, because most of you are familiar with these facts, more so, than I. But the mention of them is necessary to get other thoughts properly before us.

The work of Thomas and Alexander Campbell, if I understand it, was not to establish another church or denomination. On the contrary, they held that there were too many churches already; and that for these there is no divine warrant. They held that denominational divisions are evil, and, therefore, [240] should not exist. Hence to start another denomination, in the current sense of that term, would be to increase an existing evil. They never regarded their work in this sense during their lives. Nor are we or others justifiable in so regarding it now.

It was not the purpose of the Campbells and their co-laborers to reform the denominations as such. While there was great room for reformation in all the denominations, and is yet, still a reformation, however great, that would leave them denominations, would leave them in a position unsanctioned by the New Testament. A very great reformation has been gradually produced in the denominations, which we are satisfied is largely due to our plea and work as a people, but this is only an incidental result, and not the main object sought.

The primary object of the religious work in whose interests we are assembled was--

I. To restore the Church to the world as it was when left by the Apostles.

It must be admitted by all who respect divine example, that God cast the New Testament churches in just such a mold as He saw was best. In this respect, therefore, they were left by inspiration just as God would have them. They were left as models for our imitation. We are to copy what is approved, and avoid what is

condemned. From this divine standard the Church gradually departed, till the apostasy was the result. [241]

To restore the Church to the original model, is a work that must commend itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God, who once firmly grasps the idea. On this underlying principle rests the very pillars of the temple of faith we are trying to build. Here is the basis of our strength. The strength of God's people has ever been in their faith. Hence, if we would build strong, we must build by faith. Faith comes by the word of God. Hence, if we would build by faith, we must build by that word. What is done by faith is done by divine direction. Therefore, if we would become strong in our work, we must work by divine direction.

Men admit that our plea for restoration is a grand conception of Christian work, but say it is ideal, and can never be accomplished. Our faith is that it can be accomplished. Much has already been done, and God's word indicates that much more should and can be done. If it is never done, it will not be the fault of the plea, but of those who make it. Are the rewards of present success required to induce truth-loving men to do what God has appointed? That is the work of time-servers, and not of men who love the truth because it is the truth.

(1). This work of reformation demands that we accept Christ as our only creed, and the Bible as our only rule of faith and practice.

We sometimes say that the Bible is our creed. But this is to speak loosely; not accurately. Under the ministry of the Apostles the converts were not [242] asked if they believed the Bible, nor the New Testament; for it was not then written. But they were required to believe in Christ. They were not asked to accept some theory about Christ, but were required to accept Him, as their personal and only saviour. Accepting Him the Bible is accepted as a consequence, because He is the central thought of the Book. Take Christ out of the Bible, and you take its life out. The Bible becomes our rule of faith and practice because it is an amplification of our creed--a divine commentary on its wonderful meaning--Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Whether or not we would have another creed, is not a matter of choice with us. We are compelled to have this, and this only, or abandon our plea. For this only did the churches have whose imitation our plea demands.

(2). Our work demands that we hold to the simplicity of conversion, and admission into the Church by baptism, just as we find them in the New Testament. The simple presentation of the Gospel facts to be believed, commands to be obeyed, and promises to be enjoyed, disentangled from the sectarian confusion on the subject of conversion, has ever been a tower of strength to the cause we plead. Our plea compels us to stick close to Bible facts on all these points, without regard to theories. Without a reproduction of these historic facts, our work of restoration would not be a restoration of New Testament Christianity. [243]

(3). Our work demands that we call Bible things by Bible names. We must have the Bible things. We can not have a complete restoration without them. Then when we have the things which the New Testament churches had, we must give them the names that the Holy Spirit gave them. To disregard the things they had, or the names given them, is to presume to improve on divine wisdom. A departure from this principle could never result 'in a restoration of the Church of God as it was when these things existed. Of course I speak of things of divine appointment and approval, and not of mere incidentals.

As a natural result of the restoration of New Testament Christianity, and resting on that divine foundation, is--

## II. Our plea for Christian union.

The union of all God's people in one harmonious body, as they were in the apostolic age, is a thing for which every one who loves the Lord should both work and pray. The necessity of this in order to the world's conversion, it is not my purpose to discuss. It is sufficient to say that its evident importance and righteousness have so struck the popular mind that it is one of our greatest elements of strength.

(1). Our plea for Christian union implies that there are Christians to unite.

It has ever been admitted that God has children [244] among the denominations--those who have obeyed, the Gospel and are serving Him in the spirit of humility. To deny that there are Christians apart from those who stand identified with us in our work of restoration, would be to make our plea for Christian union both meaningless and senseless. While we believe that many identified with the denominations are Christians, they have taken on much that is neither Christianity nor any part of it; and this we labor to have them put away. These are the things that cause sectarian divisions, with all their evils. Such people are more than Christians; and what they have in addition is wrong. In being more than Christians they become less than what Christians should be. This may appear paradoxical, but it is true.

It will be seen, therefore, that while we claim to be Christians only, we do not claim to be the only Christians. Our principles will not allow us to be anything else; and we strive to have others satisfied with being the same. Hence the change so often made, that we arrogate to ourselves alone the name Christian, is false. We simply decline to be more than this, because God's people in New Testament times were nothing more. To those who love the simplicity of apostolic Christianity this position will commend itself with great force.

(2). Our plea for the union of God's people implies that the Church of God includes more than [245] those engaged in this work of restoration. In other words, that the Church of God is a more comprehensive term than those descriptive of our work.

God's Church is composed of individual Christians, wherever they may be. Of His Church they become members by obedience to the Gospel. They do not forfeit their membership in God's Church till they cease to be His children. As long as they are children of God they are members of the body of Christ. Hence if there are children of God outside of what the world calls Campbellism, the Church of God extends beyond the same boundary. Consequently, while we claim to belong to the Church of God only, we do not claim to be the only people who belong to the Church of God. Others who belong to the Church of God also belong to a church not of God. They belong to two churches, while we belong to but one. Hence the whole charge of exclusiveness brought against us on this point turns on the question as to whether or not it is one's privilege to belong to but one church, and that the Church of God? That God's people in ancient times belonged to but one Church is simply an admitted fact; and His people now should belong to that, and that only, to which they belonged then.

In the New Testament the word church is applied to a local congregation and to the whole body of believers. It is never used in any denominational sense. Consequently we may not limit it to any [246] religious people now, unless we believe that they include all God's children. While, therefore, we belong to the Church of God only, and our principles will not allow us to belong to any other, we should be careful to give to that term no mere denominational meaning. When I say I belong to the Church of God, the Church of Christ, or any other scriptural term by which the same thing is designated, I mean that I belong to God's redeemed family,

"Part of whom have crossed the flood,

And part are crossing now."

(3). From this it follows that our work of restoration is wholly undenominational.

When the Church of Christ shall be restored as it was at the beginning, or to the extent of that restoration, it will be wholly undenominational. This is true from the simple fact that there were no denominations then. No one then belonged to the Church of God and also to some denomination. All the Apostles belonged to the Church of God. None of them belonged to any denomination. So of all the disciples. What was true then may be true now; and to the extent that this is true, or ever shall be true, in the restoration of the Church, to that extent will denominationalism cease. Our plea means its destruction. It can mean nothing less. This is the secret of their intense hatred of it. But be it so; truth can never compromise with error.

The great objection which the world has urged [247] against our plea for Christian union is, that we can not all think alike. In this they have their mind more on opinion than faith. Hence we have found it necessary to urge a union on faith and not on opinion. One important item of our plea has, therefore, become

III. Unity of faith and diversity of opinion. Many have thought the distinction between faith and opinion more fanciful than real. We think, however, that between the two there is a clearly-marked line in the word of God. One is a matter of divine statement, the other of human inference. Or rather, one is that which divine testimony establishes without doubt; the other that which is probable, but on which the testimony is not conclusive. The strength of one's opinion is governed by the strength of testimony. We have this strikingly illustrated in Abraham at the offering of Isaac. The test of his faith was not simply in taking the life of his son, but in taking the life of him whose posterity God had said should be as numerous as the sands on the seashore. The question with Abraham was, if I obey God's command, how can He fulfill His promise? His faith was that God would do what He had promised. His opinion was that He would do it by raising Isaac from the dead. (See Heb. xi:19). This was the conclusion of his reasoning; not of God's statement. In his faith he was right. In his opinion he was wrong. God did it, but did it not as Abraham [248] expected. Abraham's opinion, though wrong, interfered not with his obedience. This has ever been the real test of the hurtfulness or innocence of one's opinion. So long as it does not stand in the way of one's obedience to God, it will not interfere with his salvation. And while it does not interfere with one's salvation, he should be permitted to enjoy it. But he should not be permitted to disturb the peace of Zion by urging it on others as an item of faith. When one's opinion, however, stands in the way of his obedience to God, it becomes fatal. Hence, after all, obedience becomes the test of acceptance and fellowship.

(1). From the distinction between faith and opinion it follows that nothing should be claimed as an item of faith that is not clearly expressed by precept, example or necessary inference.

What God has clearly expressed as His will, men should be required to accept and do. This faith in Christ demands. Without this there can be no unity of faith. Further than this we can not go without requiring unity of opinion; and that the Bible does not authorize.

(2). From this it follows that we may make nothing a test of fellowship that Christ has not made a condition of salvation.

If we recognize those in the fellowship of the Church of God who do not comply with the clearly expressed conditions of salvation; we break down all barriers between the Church and the world. If we [249] refuse to

fellowship obedient believers on account of something which Christ has not made a condition of salvation, we arrogate to ourselves the prerogative of binding on earth what has not been bound in heaven. Hence the whole question of fellowship turns on the conditions of salvation.

(3). While our plea demands conformity to the precepts and examples of God's word, we should carefully mark the distinction between the essentials and the incidentals of that age of the Church which we have accepted as an example for our imitation. When we fail to insist on that which was an essential item in New Testament faith or practice, we fail to that extent in our work of restoration. When we insist on the mere incidentals of that age, which did or did not exist, according to circumstances, we contend for a religion shaped by accident, rather than by divine principles.

The observance of the foregoing principles has constituted, I think, our main elements of strength as a religious people.

#### ELEMENTS OF WEAKNESS.

While it is important to know our strength, it is equally important to understand our weakness. That we have elements of weakness is a painful fact. These we should study to understand, and labor to correct. Our judgment is, that prominent among the things now constituting our weakness is-- [250]

I. The extent to which we are losing sight of our distinctive plea.

Unless we have a distinctive plea we have no right to exist. The day we become like the denominations around us, that day ends our right to exist as a distinct religious people. If we have a distinctive plea, in that consists our strength. I believe that our distinctive principles are made less prominent in our pulpits now than formerly. I do not mean that our preachers should be always on what is called "first principles." Very far from it. But I do mean that all our members should be deeply indoctrinated in the things that distinguish us from other religious peoples. The people should understand why they occupy the position they do. The better this is understood the more it will be appreciated, and the more firm and consistent will be the Christian life. When people are led to believe that sectarianism is about as good as New Testament Christianity their influence for the cause we plead is positively hurtful. Whenever we begin to curry favor with the sects and fawn upon them for recognition, we are certain to say but little about a plea that lays the axe at the root of the whole denominational tree. Whenever we begin to curry favor with the world, we are certain to fall in with the world's notions, and adjust ourselves to the world's ways. Hence much of that in which churches now indulge in the way of worldly amusements, carnal methods [251] of raising money, the spirit of mere entertainment in the worship, etc., is due to the fact that they copy the sects, rather than the New Testament churches; and are filled with the spirit of the world, instead of the spirit of Christ.

The religion of Christ is a religion of spirituality. When you take the spirituality out of a church, you take the life out of it. You may have members and wealth and culture left, but the power of divine truth and love is gone. There is too much of this spirit pervading our churches. Worldly conformity in spirit, in worship, in life, is the great weakness from which our cause is suffering; and this is largely due, in my judgment, to the want of strict adherence to the fundamental plea that gave us our power in the past. If the restoration of New Testament Christianity, in spirit and in life, as well as in form, had full possession of our hearts, this would never be.

(1). One thing, I think, in which we have copied largely from the world, and which adds greatly to our weakness, is our practice in church government.

In large measure we borrowed from the Baptists the democrat idea of church government. We learned to decide too many things by a majority of the popular vote. We act as if the kingdom of God were a democracy, and not an absolute monarchy. This has given rise to immense trouble. It has left questions, to be settled by boys and girls who hardly know whether the Acts of the Apostles is [252] in the Old Testament or the New, that were decided by Jesus Christ more than eighteen hundred years ago.

Much is said in this age about an inefficient eldership, and said with much truth. Truth is a natural and necessary consequence of this false idea of church government. Any man will become inefficient anywhere when he is made a mere figure-head. When the bishops are recognized as the "overseers" of the congregation, who are to govern the church in harmony with law so long as they are kept in that place, they will have inducement to make themselves efficient. And only those thus capacitated should be put into the position. The New Testament example is to have none, till you have men qualified for the work. And it is always safest and best to follow the Book. Democracy may be well enough in human governments, but it is unknown in the kingdom of God. When the young and giddy ignore the eldership, and take the reins in their own hands, instead of honoring them as their spiritual counselors and rulers, the restoration at this point breaks down. We are exceedingly weak here, and the symptoms are not favorable for improvement.

(2). From democratic ideas of church government have arisen extreme injurious views of congregational independence.

In breaking away from the ecclesiastical slavery of the past, my judgment is, that we have run to the opposite extreme, and become too free. Freedom [253] is a good thing when properly used, but when it runs into licentiousness it is worse than bondage. While the churches of Christ are under no ecclesiasticism, in the current sense of that term, they sustain a close relation to one another in the "general assembly and Church of the first-born." This relation can not be disregarded without disintegration and mischief. My candid judgment is, that this has been done, and continues to be done, to the serious weakening of the bonds that should unite as one loving household of faith all who are striving for the same grand work of restoration. Each church ought to feel itself in sympathy with every other, as sisters in the great family of God, and so act as to respect the interests, the rights, and the feelings of all the others. The spirit of congregational independence that disregards this fraternal unity, is not of Christ.

Another thing which may be justly regarded as a great weakness in our cause is--

II. A want of co-operation in church work.

In union there is strength. In co-operation there is power. We have not worked together as we should for the accomplishment of so grand an end. As individuals and churches we have acted too much on the principle of every one for himself. We must learn to work as one body if we would ever accomplish what we should toward the world's conversion. [254] We think this co-operation has been hindered in several ways.

(1). Much of the indifference and opposition to co-operation has been produced doubtless by imprudence in the work.

In our mission work we have not always been just as careful as we should have been to infringe upon no New Testament legislation, and thereby create no fears or opposition. Our privileges and duties in these matters lie within certain limits, and the more careful we are to regard these limits the more unity and

harmony will there be in the work. Should we differ as to the amount of liberty which the New Testament grants, it is not wise to disregard the judgment of a large and influential element of the brotherhood, and thereby provoke their opposition. Union in poorer methods is infinitely preferable to division in better ones. We plead for the union of all Christians by showing the power and divine wisdom there is in it. We censure the sects for doing that which creates unnecessary division in Christian work. In our mission work it would be well for some of us to take a dose of our own prescription. A disposition now growing to make missionary conventions, and their executive boards, high courts ecclesiastic to decide upon and officially settle controverted questions in the brotherhood, touching missionary matters, will eventually, if persisted in, drive from such societies every prudent man, in disgust. [255] (2). A still greater amount of this indifference is due to a false education with reference to the support of the Gospel.

The warfare that was justly made by Alexander Campbell on the "hired clergy" was largely misconstrued, and produced a general feeling of opposition to the support of preachers of the Gospel. We are very easily educated in the direction of our selfishness. From this false education the churches have never recovered. Many of them have vastly improved, but we are still suffering from the effects of that wrong idea at the start. In addition to this, the false idea of congregational independence has caused many churches to adopt as scriptural the motto that "charity begins at home." They have been slow to learn that while a church has its own local work to perform, for which it is congregationally responsible, it is only a small part of the great body whose interests are its interests, and to which it should constantly look, and for which persistently work. The church that never looks beyond its own local interests has a low and selfish conception of Christianity. When congregations become independent in their feelings and actions with reference to the welfare of others, they will soon become independent of their Master.

It is a very easy matter, therefore, for us to slight any co-operative work when we have no heart in the thing to be accomplished. We are naturally hard to please about ways and means when we are [256] indifferent about the end. If we had the spirit of our Master we would be striving to save the world; and if we doubted the wisdom of the plan open to us for its accomplishment we would risk its want of wisdom till we could do better. The fact is, if we all had more of the spirit of Christ in our hearts we would have more regard for and confidence in one another.

Our last and greatest weakness that I shall mention is--

III. A want of personal consecration to the work.

No man or body of men ever succeeded grandly in any cause who did not throw into it their concentrated energies. If our affections are divided between the Church and the world, we shall accomplish but little. "This one thing I do," is the secret of success. A consecrated life is a life of power.

(1). A want of consecration is now being manifest largely on the part of preachers.

While I believe the world contains no truer and nobler men than those now engaged in pleading for the restoration of New Testament Christianity, I do not believe that the cause of Christ is absorbing our attention as it should. Many of us now seem wholly indisposed to practice that self-denial that characterized our fathers in this good work. Too many of us are hunting an easy place. We want every thing lovely. One humble, self-denying, earnest preacher of the Gospel, of mediocre ability, with the spirit of John T. Johnson, is worth a ten-acre field full of [257] clerical babies, that whine to be dandled on the luxurious lap of the Church and fed on dainties. Our Master never had an easy place, nor should we expect to find one till we find it in the grave.

Again, there are too many of us beginning to look to secular pursuits. Circumstances may demand this in many cases, but we should be careful that it is first demanded. The man who spends the week in peddling sewing machines or patent churns, will come before his neglected and hungry congregation on the Lord's day with a dish of hash. People soon tire of theological hash. Like eating-house hash, it is difficult for them to see what it is made of. But, unlike cheap hotel hash, they generally find nothing in it. Consequently the preacher that feasts on the world all the week, and gives his congregation the scraps on Sunday, soon ceases to be in demand; and then he complains of the church. Brethren, let us be sure that a consecrated life is unappreciated by the Church before we turn to the world for our daily bread.

(2). Church officers and private members are too much disposed to look after their own private interests, and to neglect the interests of the church.

Could we all get out of this selfishness, and be consecrated to the Lord's work, our colleges, orphan schools, missionary enterprises, religious publications, and all other good works of the Church of God, would receive our sympathy and support. We could feel that they are all a part of our work because they are [258] a part of the Lord's work; hence we would never cast them aside as none of our business simply because we are not paid to look after them. This want of individual interest in all the work of Gods which demands a heavy outlay in time and money to enlist our attention and aid, is a paralyzing weakness to the whole body. We should seek to remedy it as soon as possible, by imbibing and cultivating the spirit of our Master, and expanding our hearts with more of His pure and undefiled religion. [259]

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