

Opportunity and Opposition

by Isaac Errett

The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing both the opportunities and oppositions that arise in the work of spreading the gospel.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:9, Matthew 6:33, Acts 14:27, 1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12, Philippians 2:13, Colossians 4:3, James 4:13, Revelation 3:7

Topics: "Divine Providence", "Missionary Work"

Description

Isaac Errett preaches about the great and effectual doors that God opens for preaching the gospel, emphasizing the importance of seizing opportunities to share the Word. He highlights the providential openings granted by God for success in spreading the gospel, stressing the need for divine providence and human agency to work together. Errett discusses the significant opposition faced in the form of Roman Catholicism, rationalism, and the secular spirit of the age, which hinders missionary efforts. He calls for a revival of prayer, humility, and devotion to God's will to overcome selfishness and indifference in advancing the kingdom of God.

Transcript

"For a great and effectual door is opened unto me; and there are many adversaries."--1 Cor. 16:9.

N Scripture style, and indeed in classic style, "door," in its metaphorical use, often signifies an opportunity. Thus (Acts 14:27) Paul and Barnabas, on returning from their first missionary tour, related to the church in Antioch "what things God did by them, and that he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles." This does not mean, as many have supposed, that faith was the door through which the Gentiles entered into the church, but simply that God had given them an opportunity to believe, through the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. Again: "When I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord" (2 Cor. 2:12)--that is, a good opportunity was offered to preach the gospel. And to the Colossians he says: "Pray for us that God would open to us a door of utterance [60] to speak the mystery of Christ" (Col. 4:3) that is, an opportunity to utter the Word. And to the church in Philadelphia, He "who opens and none can shut, and shuts and none can open," says: "I have set before thee an open door, which no one is able to shut" (Rev. 3:7, 8). I have made an opportunity of deliverance from thine adversaries, and an occasion to do good in my service.

According to our text, an unusual opportunity was afforded at Ephesus for preaching the gospel; it is called a great opportunity in reference to its extent, and effectual in regard to the effectiveness of the labor

bestowed.

We learn from all these texts that, in preaching the gospel, success depends much on the providential openings that are granted. While the means divinely ordained for the world's salvation are always the same, and the gospel is as much the power of God at one time as at another, so far as its essential efficacy is concerned, yet it does not always produce the same results, because the means of access to the hearts of men are not all times equal. It is not the gospel in a book or in the mind of the preacher that is the power of God to salvation, but the gospel in the sinner's heart, understood, believed and accepted. But the means of access to the individual heart, and to the hearts of a whole community, are no part of the gospel. They furnish a channel through which that power flows. Power, even to almightiness, may be locked [61] up in the gospel, but it is just equal to no power at all until it is brought to bear upon the sinner for whose salvation it is intended. It must, in some way, be transferred to his mind and heart and conscience; and, in effecting this transfer, much depends upon the door of opportunity that may be opened. The state of the individual mind; the state of the public mind; the influences that may hold up or cast down ancient prejudices that may carnalize the tastes of a population so as to destroy all desire after spiritual things, or blast that carnality by terrible experiences that set all hearts to hungering and thirsting after righteousness--that may lead a political power to prohibit the preaching of the gospel, or to allow the liberty of speech--that hold up a system of error or imposture in a particular juncture, reveal its untrustworthiness and hideousness, so as to cause a decay of public sentiment: these have much to do with the matter of the gospel's success. Hence, the success of the gospel is dependent on Divine Providence, and its success is, therefore, a subject of prayer. God raises up and casts down men and nations, grants prosperity to blind and harden men, and sends adversity to open their eyes and soften their hearts. The winds and waves, the treasures of rain and hail and thunder and lightning, the caterpillar, the palmer-worm and the locusts, war, famine, pestilence, commercial prosperity and disaster, and all other agencies and [62] instrumentalities that affect the condition of society, and move on the hearts of men for salvation or destruction, are at His command. He opens, and none can shut; He shuts, and none can open.

This suggests to us a truth of the greatest possible moment. The success of the gospel is not simply a question of ways and means of our creation or at our disposal. The gospel may have in it, as it has, all the saving power necessary for its object; we may have all the means necessary for its promulgation, eloquent preachers, learned advocates, powerful writers, men and money, numbers, social position, and all else that wise policy or worldly prudence could suggest, and yet, if the door is not opened, if God open not the way of access to the hearts of men, vain are wealth and learning and skill and system, and social influence, and vain, too, is gospel truth and grace. I apprehend that much of the controversy on spiritual influence would cease if parties understood each other. I am inclined to think that what others call, in the one phase of the subject, the work of the Holy Ghost, we call Divine Providence, and the difference is about the name rather than the thing. Certain it is we all admit that, while Paul may plant and Apollos water, it is God, and God alone, that gives the increase. We all pray for the conversion of sinners. We all feel, though none of us as deeply as we should, that if anything is done in the conversion of [63] sinners, the utmost that man can say is, "Behold what God has done by me." With others, this is called the immediate work of the Spirit; with us, it is called the gracious providence of God. Call it what you will, there must be the door opened, and it is God who opens the door. It is ours to pray for the opening, to watch for the opening, and, when it comes, to enter in and work with God and for Him.

But our text places in juxtaposition with the thought of great opportunity providentially afforded, another thought, not in itself startling, but startling from the place it occupies, and the relation it bears; that is, great opposition. Great opportunity and great opposition. A great and effectual door is opened, and there are many adversaries. Strangely as this sounds, the association is not unnatural. The same soil that produces a luxuriant yield of corn produces also a corresponding abundance of weeds and noxious plants.

The same sun and rain that make the grass to spring, start also the poisonous vine, and the slimy serpent is warmed into life by the beams of the same sun that speeds the flight of the lark and wakes his morning song. If the press gives us Bibles, it gives us also infidel books as readily. If free speech enables us to preach the gospel without restraint, it equally removes restraint from the enemy of the gospel. If the influences of the age quicken intellect and promote education, this [64] furnishes power as well to the foe as to the friend of Christ.

If steam speeds the movements of the herald of truth, it equally speeds the movements of his adversary. And if the hearts of good men are stirred to attempt great things for God, it is to be expected that the hearts of bad men will be stirred to attempt great things in opposition. Moreover, there is a law in the moral universe corresponding to that which prevails in the material system, by virtue of which harmony and equipoise are developed by the play of antagonistic forces.

The centripetal and centrifugal forces belong to both systems, and far beyond what we can comprehend in our greatest grasp of thought, the purposes of God in behalf of ultimate order, peace and blessedness are developed in the fierce antagonisms of good and evil, truth and falsehood, life and death. We need not wonder, therefore, at the juxtaposition in our text of great opportunities with great oppositions. Inattention to the inevitable association of these is what gives rise to the entirely opposite estimates made of the age we live in.

To some it is an age of great progress and of great glory. Slavery is dying; liberty is triumphant; thrones of despotism are tottering; Church and State are dissolving their accursed partnership; light is spreading; the public conscience is becoming more sensitive; science is winning marvelous triumphs; war is losing its horrors; sectarianism is being shorn of its prestige; [65] nations are coming into closer relations; barbarous empires are opening their gates to Christian influences, and the millennium is surely coming. On the other hand, we have a most lugubrious outlook and most dolorous vaticinations.

Wars are more terrible than ever; crime is rampant; vice is shameless; pride and fashion are swallowing up all manly virtue and womanly goodness; stock gambling and drunkenness have utterly debauched the public conscience; marriage has lost its sacredness, and the foundations of society are crumbling; liberty is but a name; imperial despotism and red republicanism are but different phases of the same utter godlessness that blots out all virtue; the Pope of Rome is supplanted by the more hateful and reckless king of Italy; crime is increasing, even in the lands where it was supposed it had reached its maximum; the world is godless, the church is Christless, and there is no hope left for truth and virtue but for Christ to come and put an end to the controversy by the terrors of omnipotence.

These parties have each but half a picture. They are both right and both wrong, like the knights who fought over the shield which was gold on one side and silver on the other, but of which they each had seen but one side. Our text affords a solution of the difficulty: a great and effectual door is opened, and there are many adversaries. [66]

This leads into the heart of our discourse--the encouragements and discouragements that belong to the work in which we are engaged. It is wise to look at both.

I. Let us look at the great and effectual door that is opened to us in our missionary work. Going back half a century to the beginning of this reformatory movement, let us look at the errors and wrongs which the reformers complained of as justifying their plea for reformation.

1. Numerous, ever-increasing and hostile sects, filled with strife and bitterness, "hateful and hating one another."

2. Human creeds, some of them of large dimensions, embodying much more philosophy than faith, and substituting metaphysical speculations for the simplicity of the gospel of Christ; and these erected into standards of orthodoxy and tests of fellowship, so that believers who ought to have been one in Christ were alienated and divided by rival systems of theology, and ruled by party watchwords, such as the Bible knows nothing of, to the great scandal of the cause of Christ.

3. Religious mysticism, the simple faith and obedience to which the gospel calls us, being supplanted by mystical conceptions of spiritual influence, so that dreams, visions, strange sights and sounds, and unusual emotions were of more authority in the matter of regeneration and conversion than the plainest declarations of the word [67] of God, and a text of Scripture, springing into the memory under strong excitement of the mind, was more the voice of God than the severest deductions resulting from the most careful and enlightened exegesis of the holy Scriptures.

4. Hierarchical arrogance, the uplifting of clerical and priestly claims to expound the Scriptures and rule the church of God, so that merely human inventions and pretensions were making void the commandments of God, and defacing, if not destroying, the character of the church of Christ as a spiritual brotherhood. Along with this were formalism and ritualism, the other extreme from that blind emotionalism mentioned in the last item, reducing religion to a stereotyped set of doctrines and round of ceremonies almost wholly unknown to the primitive church.

5. A superstitious reverence for King James' Version of the Scriptures, so that even its errors and absurdities were regarded as inspired, and all attempts to remove them by faithful and learned criticism as sacrilege.

The results of all this were deplorable. Religion was to myriads a matter of awful uncertainty; there was no telling whether one was a Christian or not. Men vibrated between exultant hope and blank despair, all lifelong robbed of settled peace in believing. Myriads more were driven into doubt as to the truth of religion itself. Party animosities not only divided and distracted [68] the forces which ought to have been moving on in harmony for the conquest of the world, but presented so hateful an aspect of religious life to the world as to rob it of converting power. The clangor and clashings of the theological warfares did not sound like that sweet singing of the angels when Christ was born: "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and good will to man." Moreover, the rivalries of the sects gave rise to every sort of effort, on the part of each, to gain or to maintain the ascendancy, so that the church was largely secularized, and the power of primitive unity, spirituality and singleness of purpose almost utterly lost. This is a sad picture, but it is very feebly and dimly drawn, and does injustice to the truth in its too limited and too feeble statements.

In opposition to all this, the plea for reformation was sent forth, marked by the following distinctive features

1. The essential unity of the followers of Christ. Sects are unscriptural, mischievous and wicked, and the people of God should abandon them and return to the original teaching of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body, one Spirit, one hope, one God and Father of all.

2. The alone-sufficiency and the all-sufficiency of the holy Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. Authoritative human creeds should be abandoned, and nothing be required as a term of membership in the church, or as a bond of fellowship, for [69] which there can not be produced a "Thus with the Lord," in express precept or approved precedent.

3. The gospel, the power of God to salvation, in opposition to all professed revelations of the Spirit in dreams, visions, voices and impressions. The gospel consists of (1) facts--facts replete with the wisdom, grace and power of God; facts to be believed, and which, when believed, will shatter skepticism, destroy pride, root out sinful desires, and bring the soul in repentance to bow humbly to the will of God; (2) of commandments--commandments to be obeyed; commandments in cheerfully accepting which we may test our change of heart, and learn how far we are genuinely converted; (3) of promises--promises of pardon, adoption, of the Holy Spirit, of fatherly guidance, priestly intercession, and spiritual fellowship, and of the joys of an endless life; promises to be appropriated and enjoyed as the result of hearty obedience to the gospel. So that when we believe the facts, obey the commandments and enjoy the promises of the gospel, we are Christians, and may know it and rejoice in it as surely as we may know the existence of God and of Christ. And all this is in the gospel always, everywhere, day and. night, year in and year out, for every one who will accept it, and for all on precisely the same conditions.

4. The equal brotherhood of all Christians--all children of God, all kings and priests to God. No [70] popes, no cardinals, no archbishops, no clergy, no hierarchy; "for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Fatherly teachers and guides, brotherly helpers, and genuine brotherly co-operation in all good works, these may be and must be, but no lords over the heritage of God, none to have dominion over our faith.

5. The pure word of God as our light and our food, and fellowship in keeping the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every one bound to honor Jesus and to obey Him--no one bound in ought outside of this. Every soul answerable to God for its convictions and doings in all else--answerable to its brethren only for integrity in the faith of Christ and faithful obedience to His laws. Hence, it became a matter of first importance to possess the pure word of God, and to cast out all interpolations and corruptions of the text. The careful and critical study of the original text, and a faithful translation of the text, that all men might know the truth and walk in its light, became an essential demand from the principles already adopted. In a word, the church of the New Testament in opposition to sects; Christ in opposition to all human leaderships; faith in Christ and obedience to Christ, as terms of fellowship in opposition to all doctrinal and ecclesiastical tests; the New Testament in opposition to all human creeds, as the standard of truth in the church, [71] and gospel facts, conditions and promises in opposition to all imaginative, arbitrary or mystical evidences of pardon or adoption. These are the prominent items of the reformation we have been pleading, which in fifty years has gathered half a million of communicants in this land, and thirty thousand in this State.¹

The conflict has been a severe one--not always wisely waged, it may be; not without some mixture of error and extravagance, but, in the main, it has been manfully and ably waged, and bravely sustained against tremendous opposition. But today we are enabled to say, with Paul, in reference to this plea: "A great and effectual door is opened unto us." These fifty years have witnessed a gradual, but wonderful, revolution in the religious sentiments of the people. The hyper-Calvinism and Antinomianism often so prevalent, and so

fruitful a source of protest and revolt, are scarcely heard of. Many of the fierce controversies of that time have entirely ceased. The theological speculations of that period have given place to matters of more solid, practical import. The theologians and mystics of that time regarded us as little better than infidels, because we fixed the sinner's attention on Christ, and received him to baptism on his simple avowal of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, but rationalism has forced this issue upon the Christian world, so that to-day the great [72] question in theology is the Christological question, and everything distinctive between the believing and unbelieving world hinges on the answer to this question: "Is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, or not?" Creed authority is on the wane; has, in fact, largely departed. Even in good old Scotland, where metaphysics and stubbornness find their sacredness, their wise men confess that a new departure must be made. In this country, no one dreams longer of holding the members of the churches to the church standards; and they are fast learning that they can not hold the clergy either. More and more, men are learning everywhere to value faith in Christ and obedience to Christ as the true test of Christian fellowship, and to reduce all else to the plea of expediency. Sect dominion is also rapidly waning. The demand for the union of Christians is increasing every day, and the charms of denominationalism are not half so prominent in the public eye as its evils and mischiefs. The science of Biblical criticism may be said to have been reconstructed during these fifty years, so that the necessity for a more faithful translation of the Scriptures is no longer debatable.

Add to this the general revolution in the public mind as to investigating all these questions. There is no longer trouble to obtain a hearing. No apology is needed these days for overhauling these questions and pointing out the need of [73] reformation. It is rather demanded. A man needs but to be manly, honorable, respectful and competent, and everywhere his plea will be listened to with interest.

In all this it will be seen that a great and effectual door is opened to us. I need allude to but one additional fact of this nature. The last year has brought us into more friendly and favorable relation with our Baptist brethren, in so far, at least, as to prepare the way to exchange the hostilities of the past for friendly and candid inquiry. What may come of this, no one can foresee, but it must be good and not evil. Essentially we are one people. There are not more serious differences between us than they find among themselves or than we find among ourselves. In all that is cardinal in Christian faith and practice--standing on the authority of the same New Testament, pleading for the same Lord, the same faith and the same baptism--we are, I repeat, essentially one people, and ought to be able ere long to enter into friendly intercourse and hearty co-operation. Our differences belong largely to the past. Those which remain are not sufficiently serious to warrant a hostile array of forces. We have no desire to attempt to force a union; nor have we, indeed, any great anxiety as to the issue of the attempt we have made to overcome the alienations of the past. We have only followed the leadings of Providence, and we have confidence that if union [74] is the best thing, a great and effectual door will be opened.

II. But now we must look at the other side. "And there are many adversaries." It is idle to attempt to disguise the fact that, while the opportunity for speaking the truth is great, the opposition is correspondingly great.

1. Look at Roman Catholicism, with its shameless avowal of the despotic spirit and doctrines of the darkest of the Dark Ages, and its impious claim to Papal infallibility; its open hostility to freedom of speech, free school and state education. And look at her progress in spite of all this, in our own land--her immense purchases of real estate, her control of politics and of the public funds, and the fear and dread of offending her that is manifested by our politicians generally; and you have one style of opposition formidable in its dimensions and in the practiced skill by which it is conducted.

2. Look at rationalism in its varied phases--undeifying Christ and pantheistically defying human reason, plying the inquisitive minds of the age with the follies and discords of the Protestant world, and paralyzing the faith of myriads in the word of God and the divinity of our Lord Jesus. Not so much in the converts openly made as in the indifferentism everywhere engendered, is its power to be dreaded. It is a fearful reaction from the creed bondage of the past. In rejecting human [75] authority, they reject also the divine, and the inspired creed is swept with the uninspired into a common condemnation.

3. Far more widespread is the mischief arising from the intensely secular spirit of the age. The second mentioned evil is one that is realized by thinkers and students; but the mass of people do not think or study closely on these subjects. Without much thought or study they drink in the spirit of the age, which is grossly material and worldly. It is an age of material interests. Even science is subsidized by materialism, and has its chief value in ministering to the advancement of material interests.

Education no longer proposes intellectual and moral enlargement and elevation as an end. Its end now is to fit us for the successful pursuit of wealth. Money is more than intellect, and intellect more than heart, these days. We are willing to wear the long ears of Midas, if only every thing we touch may turn to gold. This insane thirst for riches, and the absorbing interest in the worldly pursuits which it necessarily engenders, puts every spiritual interest in peril. Not only are the devotees of wealth impervious to all attacks made by the gospel on heart and conscience, but the church is unnerved for the attack that ought to be made.

This secular spirit is eating out the piety of heart and home and church. The closet is forsaken; the family altar crumbles. The Bible is no longer the book of the household. The daily [76] papers, saturated with worldliness and reeking with vice and crime, and the weekly or monthly journal of literature and fashion, utterly Christless, if not positively infidel in its tendencies, form the reading of the family. Beyond this, if books are reached, they are apt to be frothy fictions, written to minister to sentimentalism, and leaving the reader with hot blood and prurient desires.

Our children go from these almost godless homes to secular schools, from which everything moral and religious is being most diligently rooted out, in obedience to the atheistic demands of a foreign population, who are not content to enjoy in this land the liberty which Christianity has given them, but seek to establish in our country the same atheistic principles that have already sapped the foundations of morals in Europe, and made France the helpless, pitiable spectacle she is to-day.

And our churches are invaded by the same secular spirit. The simplicity and spirituality of the church of God are sacrificed to pride and fashion. The crashing thunders of truth against all sin and wrong are exchanged for dulcet notes of rhetorical elegance, or for the sky-rockets of a sensational oratory. A false and hollow liberalism succeeds to the stern old bigotry that used to reign in the pulpit. Very short prayers and ten-minute sermons are the rage now. For the rest, the house of God must be made a place of refined amusement, so as to draw.

Either delicious music or [77] startling oratory must be had to draw. And when our children go from such homes into such schools, and from such schools into such churches, what sort of a generation are we training for the work of God? I tremble when I think of it. I am no foe to refinement or to oratory, and certainly no advocate of boorishness or of Ishmaelish aggressiveness in the pulpit; but I would a thousand times rather see our pulpits filled with hairy Elijahs that could call down fire from heaven and send terror and slaughter among the foes of Israel, than with the most accomplished trimmers and slaves

of the hour.

It is this worldliness, so widespread and so insinuating, that more than anything else paralyzes our missionary efforts. We are so intoxicated with the spirit of the times that we can not be brought to sympathize with a world that is rushing down to death. And we grow so selfish and ambitious in the midst of our earthly prosperities that we have no heart to give as we ought to give to the missionary work. There is ever an increasing selfishness, attending our growth in wealth, which very few escape. We have less sympathy with the world, and more anxiety for our own interests. And this operates in regard to our religious giving as in all other things. We lose our sympathy with the world of mankind. We learn to sneer at Foreign Missions, and figure on it to ascertain how much it costs to convert a soul in [78] Africa or in India. Nor does it stop there. We soon lose all interest in benevolent enterprise in our own land, outside of our own neighborhood. Nothing can open our purse, unless it is something in our own neighborhood for our church, and for the benefit of our community. Nor will it stop there. For this mean selfishness is ordained to curse its possessor until it withers and blights every generous and noble impulse of the nature, and will eat him up at last with carking care and nervous fear lest even he himself should desire some benefit from his possessions and make some needless drain on his own resources. "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, and it tendeth to poverty."

When I look to-day on the gates that God has opened in Italy and Spain and Austria and Mexico, that His people may enter in, and think of the demands for Bibles and colporteurs and preachers, to give the bread and water of life to famishing multitudes, and remember that we have not one man offering for the work, nor one dollar to give to such an one were he to offer, I bow myself in the dust for very shame. When I look at our own broad land, and listen to the cry coming up from all quarters--from men of every country who have come hither for refuge and rest--and look at the millions of degraded freedmen ready to sink back into the lowest superstitions, and [79] think how little we are doing for them, I begin to ask whether we believe what we preach. But when I look into our own State, and see the demands at our very doors, and the openings that God has made for us, and see how slow we are to enter, and how little there is of spontaneity in our benevolence, I am staggered at the spectacle, and know not what to say.

If we had no other motive than ordinary patriotism, it should inspire us to greater effort than we are making. I have alluded to the secular character of our public-school education, and to the fact that it is becoming less and less moral and religious. It is, to my mind, clearly evident that such an education can never subserve the interests of the State, and that the church must do for the State what the State can not do for itself--infuse into society the moral and spiritual potencies which alone can conserve the interests of freedom, and impart the soul culture without which a merely intellectual education may be more of a curse than a blessing. In Binghamton, N. Y., on Tuesday last, a criminal received his doom as a murderer, whose intellectual attainments have caused our best scholars to marvel. As a linguist, he was a prodigy. His profound and varied acquirements were such that an appeal was made for his life in the interests of literature and science. Yet he was a murderer, thief, and an ingrate of the blackest dye. His sublime [80] recklessness threw a spell about his history until the last moment. Obscenities and blasphemies filled the hours until the last, and without a tear or a prayer, or a penitential sigh, he sported on the very brink, and carried his audacity and recklessness with him into the world beyond. Such brilliant intellect, with such moral recklessness, looks like a personification of Satan himself--for the Satan of the Bible is a piercing intellect joined to a thoroughly bad heart--and pity 'tis that we should seek to conform to such a model in our educational systems. We can not keep this country for God and for freedom unless moral and spiritual culture shall keep pace with intellectual culture and material enterprise. "Righteousness exalteth a nation."

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. And this culture the church alone can give. From the very nature of our free institutions, the Government can do but little in this line. He is the truest patriot, then, who most effectually promotes moral and religious interests in the community, and wins most hearts to virtue and righteousness.

But this is putting our plea on low, utilitarian ground, and is itself, perhaps, an appeal to selfishness. We must look higher. I said, in the outset, that the gospel is only the power of God when it comes in contact with the heart and conscience; and that we must rely on Providence to open the door of access to individuals and to communities. [81] But that is not the whole truth. There is not only room here for divine agency, but for human agency as well. If God opens the door, we must enter in and bear the gospel with us. Between the printed page of the glorious gospel of the grace of God and the human heart in which it is to plant the power of God, there is room for a great variety of ministries. The parent, the Sunday-school teacher, the preacher, the colporteur, the editor, the tract distributor, the Bible reader, all have work here. And here is our sphere of operations as a missionary society. When we look on the deep and dark idolatries of men, the mad devotion of the human heart to sinful pleasure and selfish gratification, the terrible enslavement of men to every form of sin until they hug their chains and bless their bondage, we can not but feel our impotence in attempting the regeneration of society. No human power can effect it. But the power of God is made available for this end. It comes to us in the gospel. It is a living and powerful Word. It penetrates, it smites, it breaks in pieces; it wounds and heals; it kills and makes alive; it reaches the very fountain of life with the energy of omnipotence; its thunders boom over the conscience with crashing terror, and its tempest force sweeps like a hurricane over the soul, and pride and stubbornness and the idols of the heart are swept away in crushed fragments like a leaf in the storm. It sheds light and peace when [82] the storm is over, and in its light a new creation rises over whose regenerate beauties and glories the morning stars sing a sweet anthem and all the sons of God shout for joy. But this power must be applied. That is our part. God grants the power, God opens the way for it. But we must apply it. We can not create good men ourselves. But we can let in the creative power of God upon the souls of men, that they may be created anew in Jesus Christ. We are honored with this august position as coworkers with God; shall we be so base as to sell this birthright for a mess of pottage--so ignoble as to refuse, through indolence or indifference, to sway this godlike power for the salvation of the world?

But I said, We must pray--pray to Him who alone opens the door, who alone gives the increase; and I greatly fear that our lack of work grows largely out of our lack of prayer. Think you we have ever yet learned to pray? I know some who think the Lord's Prayer a thing of the past, but I doubt if we have ever yet learned to breathe that prayer aright. I doubt if we have yet learned the true spirit of its first petitions. Let us see. What is the first petition in that prayer? Grant me life? No. Grant me health? No. Grant me wealth? No. Bless me and mine with all good things, and keep me from all harm and suffering, and let not adversity come nigh us, and let us have our own sweet will to do as we please? Oh, [83] no! no! no! The first petition is, "Thy kingdom come." And the second is like unto it; namely, "Thy will be done in earth as it is done in heaven." And how much does He teach us to pray for of worldly good? Just one day's supply of food--that is all. "Give us this day our daily bread." Christ would thus teach us to subordinate the earthly to the heavenly, the material to the spiritual. We have never learned that prayer, then, unless we have learned to make the spiritual first in our affections, and the interest of the kingdom of God the first and dearest desire and aim of our lives; and unless we have subjugated our will to the will of God, until we can say, "Thy will, not mine--Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth." Oh! it is this, dear brethren, that we need to make us what we ought to be. We are too much devoted to our theories of the world's conversion, and too little given to the work of converting the world. We are too little humbled before God in view of our

weakness and inefficiency, our selfishness and sinfulness. We know far too little of that absorbing, enthusiastic desire for the spread of the kingdom of God which would lead us to pray always first, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." It was the first and the last struggle of the tempter with Jesus to persuade Him to supplant the will of God with some other will--any other, no matter what; it was the first and last victory of Jesus [84] over the tempter, though it cost bloody sweat and bitter cryings and tears, to cling to the will of God, and say in the darkest hour, "Thy will be done." Would that we might all be brought, through whatever humiliation and agony, to the point of entire submission--how mightily would God enable us to move forward the triumphs of His kingdom! We have the men, we have the money, we have the open door; we want supreme devotion to the will of God--a devotion that shall conquer the lusts of the world and our carnal natures.

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