

Section Iii.--Ministerial Effects.

by William Arthur

The sermon discusses the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy, and how they are used by the Church to convert sinners and edify the faithful.

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:9, Luke 12:12, Acts 2:1, Acts 6:10, 1 Corinthians 14:1, Ephesians 6:19, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Hebrews 4:12, James 3:5, 1 Peter 4:11

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Christian Preaching"

Description

William Arthur preaches about the power of the tongue of fire, as seen in the example of Peter on the day of Pentecost. Despite Peter's lack of eloquence, his message, filled with quotes from the word of God and reasoning upon them, had a profound impact on the audience, leading to deep conviction and repentance. The sermon emphasizes the importance of prophesying, delivering a message from God under the influence of the Spirit, as a more powerful gift than speaking in tongues. The sermon highlights the necessity of the Holy Spirit's power in Christian preaching, as seen in the lives of early Christians and notable figures like Whitefield and Wesley.

Transcript

Our immediate connection with the gift of tongues, was a gift less startling as a phenomenon, but more influential as an instrument for the recovery of mankind. Peter was soon called upon publicly to deliver the Lord's message. Then, undoubtedly, he spoke not in any foreign tongue, but in his native dialect. He had often spoken before, yet nothing remarkable is recorded of his preaching, or its effects. He is now the same man, with the same natural intellect, and the same natural powers of speech; and yet a new utterance is given to him, the effects of which are instantly apparent.

Never was such an audience assembled as that before which this poor fisherman appeared: Jews, with all the prejudices of their race--inhabitants of Jerusalem, with the recollection of the part they had recently taken in the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth--met in the city of their solemnities, jealous for the honor of their temple and law; men of different nations, rapidly and earnestly speaking in their different tongues: one in Hebrew, mocking and saying, "These men are full of new wine"; another inquiring in Latin; another disputing in Greek; another wondering in Arabic; and an endless Babel besides, expressing every variety of surprise, doubt, and curiosity. Amid such a scene the fisherman stands up; his voice strikes across the hum which prevails all down the street. He has no tongue of silver, for they say, "He is an unlearned and ignorant man." The rudeness of his Galilean speech still remains with him; yet, though "unlearned and

ignorant" in their sense as to polite learning--in a higher sense he was a scribe well instructed. As respected the word of God, he had been for three years under the constant tuition of the prophet of Nazareth, hearing from his lips instruction in the law, in the prophets, and in all the "deep things of God." On whatever other points, therefore, the learned of Jerusalem might have found Peter at fault, in the sacred writings he was more thoroughly furnished than they; for though Christ took his apostles from among the poor, he left us no example for those who have not well learned the Bible, to attempt to teach it.

Yet Peter had no tongue of silver, no tongue of honey, no soothing, flattering speech, to allay the prejudices and to captivate the passions of the multitude. Nor had he a tongue of thunder; no outbursts of native eloquence distinguished his discourse. Indeed, some, if they had heard that discourse from ordinary lips, would not have hesitated to pronounce it dry--some of a class, too numerous, who do not like preachers who put them to the trouble of thinking, but enjoy only those who regale their fancy, or move their feelings, without requiring any labor of thought. Peter's sermon is no more than quoting passages from the word of God, and reasoning upon them; yet, as in this strain he proceeds, the tongue of fire by degrees burns its way to the feelings of the multitude. The murmur gradually subsides; the mob becomes a congregation; the voice of the fisherman sweeps from end to end of that multitude, unbroken by a single sound; and as the words rush on, they act like a stream of fire. Now, one coating of prejudice which covered the feelings is burned, and starts aside; now, another and another; now, the fire touches the inmost covering of prejudice, which lay close upon the heart, and it, too, starts aside. Now, it touches the quick, and burns the very soul of the man! Presently, you might think that in that throng there was but one mind, that of the preacher, which had multiplied itself, had possessed itself of thousands of hearts and thousands of frames, and was pouring its own thoughts through them all. At length, shame, and tears, and sobs overspread that whole assembly. Here, a head bows; there, starts a groan; yonder, rises a deep sigh; here, tears are falling; and some stern old Jew, who will neither bow nor weep, trembles with the effort to keep himself still. At length, from the depth of the crowd, the voice of the preacher is crossed by a cry, as if one was "mourning for his only son"; and it is answered by a cry, as if one was in "bitterness for his firstborn." At this cry the whole multitude is carried away; and, forgetful of everything but the overwhelming feeling of the moment, they exclaim: "Men and brethren, what must we do?"

No part of the proceedings of the day strikes us with a deeper or more lasting impression than the amazing change in Peter which is here manifest. We are continually prone to consider the power of a minister as a natural power, simply intellectual. Here was a man who, in all probability, had passed the period of life when eloquence is most forcible, without having distinguished himself by any such power. He comes forward with a most unwelcome message, to address an unfavorable audience, himself unskilled in the arts of oratory; and yet, such is the power of utterance given to him that he produces an effect the like of which had never been known before in the history of mankind. Never has it been recorded in any other instance, that three thousand men were in an hour persuaded by one of their own nation, of obscure origin and uninfluential position, to forego the prejudices of their youth, the favor of their people, and the religion of their fathers. "I will be with thy mouth," is more strikingly fulfilled here, in those extraordinary effects of the speaking of an ordinary man, than in any other form in which the power of God could be displayed, through the instrumentality of a human tongue. There is no part of the whole series of events which has a more direct bearing upon the permanent work of the Christian Church.

This is the first example of prophesying in the New Testament sense; not the limited sense of foretelling, but the more comprehensive sense of delivering a message from God, under the impulse of the Spirit of God, and by his aid. In this the speaker has the double advantage of ascertained truth to declare--truth

which his own understanding has received, which he can enforce by citing the word of God--and of aid direct from the Spirit in uttering it. This gift is conspicuously placed by St. Paul above that of tongues: "Greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues." The gift of tongues was "for a sign to them that believe not"; and even to them only under certain circumstances, when they were addressed in a tongue which they understood, and that by one of whom they had proof, or what amounted to strong probability, that he had not learned it in a natural mode. For the union of these two requisites nothing was so favorable as the meeting of a number of foreigners in one city, and hearing natives of the country speak all their different languages. A foreigner appearing in a city, and professing to speak its language by miracle, would lie under the suspicion of having learned it before he came; and persons speaking foreign tongues in the presence of their own unlearned countrymen would seem to utter gibberish. This Paul puts strongly to the Corinthians: "If the whole Church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?"

If a number of persons in Corinth had a gift in Hebrew, or in Latin, and their fellow-townsmen, who knew only Greek, came and heard a rush of unmeaning sounds, and were told that it was a miracle, it might be, but it was not a miracle to them. If they saw an African peasant speaking fluently in Greek, then, indeed, they would be startled; and if once assured by any means that he had not learned it, they would recognize a miracle.

But the effect of persons resident in a place using the gift of tongues could only be to satisfy the learned of a miracle. For the unlearned it would be simply bewildering. Suppose that, in the city of Oxford, the stonemasons, joiners, and shoemakers heard a few of their own number uttering something in Latin: they would only be impressed with a belief that they had gone mad, or were amusing themselves with gibberish. But did the learned men of the university find these groups discoursing on the doctrines of the gospel in the language of ancient Rome, which it had been the study and the labor of their lives to acquire perfectly, they would be overwhelmed with a sense of the prodigy. All through the fourteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul admits that upon the learned the gift of tongues would make an impression; but that the unlearned, if believers, would be unedified, and if unbelievers, would be led to mock.

To the higher gift of prophecy he assigns two offices which that of tongues could never fulfill. One is the edifying of believers; and on this score he much argues the Corinthians to seek for that gift. The other is its effect upon the unlearned unbeliever. "if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one learned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all; and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth."

Here is a man who knows no language but one, and who has no faith in the Divine mission of the Christians, yet he enters an assembly where men are speaking in his own tongue: that tongue, as to its words, is familiar to him from his childhood, but its words now convey new ideas, and those ideas are accompanied by a strange power which pierces, lays open, and searches his heart. He seems as if God had found him out, and told another man all about him--his hidden sins, his bosom pollutions, and covered deeds which had been even forgotten, but which now are brought strangely to his view again.

An unaccountable impression of God's presence, of a message, a warning, a call from God, sinks down into his soul. He feels, as he never felt before, "God is in this place"; and, falling down upon his face, forgetful of appearances, and heedless of consequences, imperiling his temporal peace, and exposing himself to every manner of remark, he worships, in bitterness of penitence, an offended but a forgiving

God, and goes forth to tell those with whom he comes in contact that the people whose words had searched his heart and made manifest its secrets must have God in the midst of them.

This was the gift of prophecy, as the term is generally employed in the New Testament. It differs from prophecy in the ordinary sense in this, that the gift conveys no "revelation," either as to truth hitherto unrevealed, or as to future events. It differs from the gift of tongues in this, that the intellect and organs act according to natural laws, though under a supernatural influence. It is that gift through which the whole of man's nature works in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, the intellect illuminated with Divine light, the moral powers quickened by Divine feeling, and the physical organs speaking with Divine power.

This is placed by the apostle as the highest gift, the one wherein can stand closest in communion with God as his intelligent instrument for his most hallowed work--the work of calling prodigal sons back to his arms, and of training feeble children into strength and steadfastness. This gift was that which had the most direct utility, was capable of the most universal application, and was destined to be permanent; equally needful for the converting of sinners and the edifying of the Church; and therefore to be ever kept in view by the Church as a special subject of prayer; for, let this cease, and Christianity dwindles into a natural agency for social improvement, blessed with superhuman doctrines, but destitute of a superhuman power.

If the preaching of the gospel is to exercise a great power over mankind, it must be either by enlisting extraordinary men, or by the endowing of ordinary men with extraordinary power. It does often happen that men whose eloquence would affect and sway, whatever might have been their theme, give all their talents to the gospel; yet in such cases it ever proves that the religious impression produced upon mankind is never regulated by the brilliancy or natural force of the eloquence, but always by the extent to which the preacher is imbued with that indescribable something commonly called the "unction," or the operation and power of the Spirit. On the other hand, it often happens that a man in whose natural gifts nothing extraordinary can be discovered produces moral effects which, for depth at the moment, and for permanency, are totally disproportioned to his natural power. In hearing such a man, and afterwards discovering the effects of his preaching, people often ask: "What is there in Mr. -- to account for such effects? We hear many who are abler, profounder, better theologians, more eloquent, more persuasive; yet this man's preaching brings people to repentance and to God." They cannot discover the source of his power; and it is precisely this fact which intimates that it is spiritual.

On the day of Pentecost, Christianity faced the world, a new religion, and a poor one, without a history, without a priesthood, without a college, without a people, and without a patron. She had only her two sacraments and her tongue of fire. The latter was her sole instrument of aggression. All that was ancient and venerable rose up before her in solid opposition. No passions of the mob, no theories of the learned, no interests of the politic, favored her; nor did she flatter or conciliate any one of them. With her tongue of fire she assailed every existing system, and every evil habit; and by that tongue of fire she burned her way through innumerable forms of opposition. In asking what was her power, we can find no other answer than this one: "The tongue of fire."

With regard to one of her deacons, Stephen, it is said that his enemies could not resist the wisdom and the power with which he spoke. It was not every disciple who had the gift of prophecy, like him, to pour out in clear and copious utterance the testimony which could command the attention of national councils, and confound the sophisms of a college of disputers; but, each in his own sphere and style, the Christians of that happy day were distinguished among their fellow-men by a strange power declaring the deep things of God. Many of them would go, like Andrew, who went first to "his own brother Simon," and tell their

kinsmen of Jesus, and forgiveness, and the resurrection of the dead, and the world to come, in strains which, by some unaccountable power, fixed the attention and entered the heart. Others of them would go, as did the brothers of Nathanael, telling the neighbors and friends whom they met the great things of redemption, so that prejudices, even the strongest, were often melted in the fire of their speech. True, they did not always succeed; but how marvelous their success was, notwithstanding! Had Christians of the present day, in addressing those whose conscience, creed, early impressions, all favor every word they say, but that strange influence which bore down the most rooted aversion, how rapid and how glorious would be the spread of living religion in the land!

This power of utterance is ordinarily referred to throughout the New Testament as at once the gift of God and the great weapon of the Church. We have already noticed how, when opposition first threatened them, they went in earnest prayer to God, and asked for power, that they might speak his word with boldness. So when any one of them, in critical circumstances, is enabled specially to declare and magnify the truth, we are told that he does so, "being filled with the Holy Ghost"; and Paul, who, though he was not present on the day of Pentecost, received the tongue of fire in a very remarkable degree, did not hold that gift as being constitutional, like natural talents and aptitude of speech. Among the subjects with regard to which he entreats the prayers of his Christian brethren, he specially mentions "utterance." "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; and for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel." Again and again have we brought before us the fact that this utterance is the direct gift of God; nor are we without traces of the same fact in earlier times than those of Christianity. In the cases of Mary and Elizabeth, we hear them, under the influence of the Divine Spirit, uttering great and glorious things. In the case of Jeremiah and Isaiah, we find the Lord making himself their strength in regard to the message wherewith he charged them; and in the case of Moses, the gift of speech was especially promised to him; but his faith failed, and consequently another had to exercise that power which, had he believed, he himself would have fully possessed.

In all the history of the primitive Christians, we find traces of the effect produced upon men by the testimony they bore, even when bearing it under the constraint of public persecution, and in the face of impending danger. Without a press, without a literature, without any of our modern means of influencing masses of men; cast solely on the one instrument of the tongue, and in that destitute of the wisdom of the Greek and of the skill of the scribe; seldom favored with the opportunity of repeatedly addressing numerous assemblies of the same individuals; destitute of prestige, contemptible in numbers, rustic in manners, and thwarted by circumstances; strong only in the one particular attribute--the unseen fire which filled them--on they went, and on, turning the hearts of their enemies, and advancing the name of the Lord.

Religion has never, in any period, sustained itself except by the instrumentality of the tongue of fire. Only where some men, more or less imbued with this primitive power, have spoken the words of the Lord, not with "the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth," have sinners been converted and saints prompted to a saintlier life. In many periods of the history of the Church, as this gift has waned, every natural advantage has come to replace it: more learning, more system, more calmness, more profoundness of reflection--everything, in fact, which, according to the ordinary rules of human thought, would insure to the Christian Church a greater command over the intellect of mankind, and would give her arguments in favor of a holy life a more potent efficacy. Yet it has ever proved that the gain of all this, when accompanied with an abatement of the "fire," has left the Church less efficient; and her elaborate and weighty lessons have transformed few into saints, though her simple tongue of fire had

continually reared up its monuments of wonder. This has been not less the case in modern times than in ancient.

If the amazing revival which characterized the last century be viewed merely as a natural progress of mental influence, no analysis can find elements of power greater than have often existed in a corrupting and falling Church, or than are found at many periods when no blessed effects are produced. Men equally learned, eloquent, orthodox, instructive, may be found in many ages of Christianity. It is utterly impossible to assign a natural reason why Whitefield should have been the means of converting so many more sinners than other men. Without one trace of logic, philosophy, or anything worthy to be called systematic theology, his sermons, viewed intellectually, take an humble place among humble efforts. Turning again to his friend Wesley, we find calmness, clearness, logic, theology, discussion, definition, point, appeal, but none of that prodigious and unaccountable power which the human intellect would naturally connect with movements so amazing as those which took place under his word. Neither the logic of the one, nor the declamation of the other, furnishes us with the secret of his success. There is enough to account for men being affected, excited, or convinced; but that does not account for their living holy lives ever after. Thousands of pulpit orators have swayed their audience, as a wind sways standing corn; but, in the result, those who were most affected differed nothing from their former selves. An effect of eloquence is sufficient to account for a vast amount of feeling at the moment; but to trace to this a moral power, by which a man, for his life long, overcomes his besetting sins, and adorns his name with Christian virtues, is to make sport of human nature.

Why should these men have done what many equally learned and able, as divines and orators, never did? There must have been an element of power in them which criticism cannot discover. What was that power? It must be judged of by its sphere and its effects. Where did it act, and what did it produce? Every power has its own sphere. The strongest arm will never convince the understanding, the most forcible reasoning will never lift a weight, the brightest sunbeam will never pierce a plate of iron, nor the most powerful magnet move a pane of glass. The soul of man has separate regions; and that which merely convinces the intellect may leave the emotions untouched; that which merely operates on the emotions may leave the understanding unsatisfied; and that which affects both may yet leave the moral powers uninspired. The crowning power of the messenger of God is power over the moral man--power which, whether it approaches the soul through the avenue of the intellect or of the affections, does reach into the soul. The sphere of true Christian power is the heart--the moral man; and the result of its action is not to be surely distinguished from that of mere eloquence by instantaneous emotion, but by subsequent moral fruit. Power which cleanses the heart, and produces holy living, is the power of the Holy Ghost. It may be through the logic of Wesley, the declamation of Whitefield, or the simple common sense of a plain servant woman or laboring man; but, whenever this power is in action, it strikes deeper into human nature than any mere reasoning or pathos. Possibly it does not so soon bring a tear to the eye, or throw the judgment into a posture of acquiescence, but it raises in the breast thoughts of God, eternity, sin, death, heaven, and hell--raises them, not as mere ideas, opinions, or articles of faith, but as the images and echoes of real things.

We may find in many parts of the country, where much has been done to dispel darkness and diffuse true religion, that some of the first triumphs of grace were entirely due to the wonderful effects produced by the private and fireside talking of some humble Christians, who had themselves gone to the throne of grace, and waited there until they had received the baptism of fire.

In proportion as the power of this one instrument is overlooked, and other means are trusted in to supply its place, does the true force of Christian agency decline; and it may without hesitation be said that when men holding the Christian ministry habitually and constantly manifest their distrust in the power of the Holy Ghost to give them utterance, they publicly abjure the true theory of Christian preaching. It is, according to the authority of its Author, delivering a message from God --a message through man, it is true, but delivered not with the excellency of man's speech, not under the guidance of man's natural wisdom; a message, the effect of which does not rest upon the artistic arrangement, choice, and order of words, but upon the extent to which its utterance is pervaded by the Holy Ghost.

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