

Section Iv.--Effects Upon the World.

by William Arthur

The sermon explores the relationship between the miracle of tongues and the conversion of people, highlighting the limitations of the miracle and the importance of the Holy Spirit's work in bringing about true conversion.

Scripture: Proverbs 27:17, Acts 2:42, Romans 15:5, Galatians 6:2, Ephesians 4:16, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 10:24, James 5:16, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Christian Community", "Fellowship And Unity"

Description

William Arthur preaches about the importance of fellowship, mutual edification, and the social element of Christianity as demonstrated in the early Church. He emphasizes the need for believers to share their spiritual experiences, struggles, and joys with one another, fostering a sense of family and unity within the Church. Arthur highlights the significance of prayer, teaching, breaking of bread, and fellowship in the life of a Christian community, drawing from the example of the early Christians in the book of Acts. He challenges the notion of isolating one's spiritual journey and encourages active participation, mutual support, and open communication among believers to strengthen their faith and edify one another.

Transcript

WHEN the promise of the Spirit was given, our Lord expressly intimated that his influence should not be confined to the Church, but that he should "convince the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." It was only thus that the Church could be extended beyond the number of the original disciples. Through the gifts bestowed upon Peter, the Spirit moved to the fulfillment of his great office in the hearts of worldly men. Both the miraculous and the ministerial gifts were made subservient to this end. The former was a wonder which raised curiosity and then amazement, which brought together a multitude, first excited, finally awed. This, however, was all it did. Had the events of the day ended with the pure effect of the miracle, perhaps no Jew would have become a Christian, and certainly no sinner would have become a saint. The miracle prepared an audience for the preacher, but it did not convert, and did not even instruct, them; no one there knew the doctrine of the incarnation and its glorious concomitants, when Peter stood up to preach. All that the gift of tongues did was to produce an impression that these men were messengers of God; and even this it did not produce on all, for some mocked--probably people of the place, on whom the effect of the foreign tongues was lost.

The entire advantage which Peter, as a preacher of Christianity, derived from the evidences of his religion, when he stood up on the day of Pentecost, amounted to this: a large number of men were congregated in

a state of much agitation, fresh from the impression of a prodigy before unimagined, and with a strong suspicion that the preacher and his coadjutors were probably teachers from God. His advantage, as compared with a modern preacher, lay in the freshness of this feeling--in the opened state of the mind just after an indisputable marvel had forced a passage through all its prejudices. Its disadvantages lay in the comparative ignorance of his hearers, in their disbelief of most of the points wherewith he wished to impress them, in the amount of religious and national prejudice which fortified this belief, in the array of temporal interests which stood up against his appeal, in the discredit attached to his position, the obscurity of his person, and the rustic stamp of his speech.

Putting his single advantage on the one side, and his many disadvantages on the other, we naturally raise the question, Had he more advantage from the miracle of tongues than the modern preacher has from the Christian evidences generally? It would be hard to exaggerate the value of that freshness of impression under which he found his hearers; yet, taking the whole course of human nature, the miracle, whether in the hand of Moses, the prophets, or the Lord himself, however mighty as an instrument of impression, as a credential of a Divine mission, never proved an instrument of moral regeneration to the people.

From the pentecostal and other miracles, from the whole array of the Christian evidences, the modern preacher derives the advantage of an audience who believe that every doctrine he propounds is truly the word of God. Within their conscience he has far more on his side than Peter had in the consciences of his auditory. Peter had the advantage of a fresh and excited feeling; the modern preacher has that of standing closer home upon the conscience. The latter often thinks how much might be effected had he only some such supernatural sign as arrested the multitude on the day of Pentecost: what would Peter have thought of his prospects, if, instead of such an audience as he had, one had been offered to him where all believed that his Master was the Son of God, and that there was "no other name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved"?

The effect of the miracle was a general impression in favor of the Divine origin of the message. At this point the ministerial gift came into operation. By an ability clearly to state and argue the truth, Peter was enabled to put the understanding of his hearers into possession of the great revelation, that God had sent his Son to redeem them. By a sacred pathos, he was enabled to engage their sympathies in favor of each truth, as he presented it. Clear and feeling utterance of the gospel was his ministerial gift; understanding and impression were its effects.

The united effect of the miraculous and ministerial gift amounted to favorable attention, understanding of the truth, and inclination to embrace it. But had no power beyond the testimony of the miracle and the appeal of the sermon touched the souls of the auditors, what single individual would have embraced truth so dangerous to his respectability and comfort, however convinced that it was of heavenly origin, and fraught with eternal advantages? The inclination toward such a step, raised by Peter's warmth, would have been counteracted by many and potent inclinations of interest and of nature. Nothing is more common than for the human mind to turn its back upon a truth, firmly believed to be from God, deeply felt to carry eternal hopes, but demanding the sacrifice of present gratifications, or of the friendship of the world. Mere conviction never carries a point of practical moral conduct.

In man, feelings and intellect are related to nature, as in a plant tissues and juices: they derive their character from nature, and manifest its bent, but are not nature, though the means by which it acts on the external world, and is reacted upon by it. Nature does not decide the comparative excellence of character in the different members of the same species: one oak may be much stronger than another, one rose

much sweeter, one man much wiser or more generous. The nature of man is essentially moral; and when intellect shoots up to eminence, it depends on the moral nature whether it is a blessing or a curse to the species, a joy or a trouble to the individual. According to the moral nature are the intellectual powers directed; and in man often wastefully, often hurtfully--as to the great majority, in ways far below their capability. Just as in all other objects, so in man, his nature eludes our analysis, lies out of sight, and defies our direct influence. We approach it through the intellect or the feelings, but always with uncertainty, never knowing what unseen power may counterwork our most careful endeavors.

It is the heart of fallen man to prefer present pleasure to the prospect of eternal happiness; the favor of the world to the favor of the Almighty; to love himself, and forget his Creator. In adults this heart is fortified by its own developments; by habits and connections which all tend in its own direction. When a man's heart in boyhood produced fruits of vice and trouble; when his advancing years have steadily answered the impulse of the same heart, and his present associations are all based upon an alienation from heavenly ties,--to bring him into immediate and permanent conformity to a divine ideal of life, requires the ultimate Power of the universe, the Power which rules nature, and through nature circumstances. Set before all the wise and good of the world one man of thirty years, or upward, whose life has been wicked or worldly; and tell them by a word, a warning, or an appeal, infallibly to change him then and there to a pure man, or to a pious man, and they will each be ready to exclaim, "Am I God, that I should do this?"

To say that man is the creature of circumstances is as much as to say that he is destitute of a nature; for where a nature is, there is a power--a power of which circumstances are often the mere effect, but are never the masters. Let all the circumstances under heaven conspire against the force of nature, as embodied in a seed of thorn, and they can never defeat it; all the gardeners, manures, heats, and waterings possible would fail to make it produce fir. Heap upon it every advantage which art and creation can give, and it will steadily turn all to thorn, hopelessly incapable of rising above its nature.

Change your treatment, and endeavor to debase it, and the same superiority of nature to circumstances continues to manifest itself. You may starve it to death, you may stunt or blight it, but by no adversity will it degenerate to brier; thorn in spite of allurements upward, thorn in spite of repulses downward: as it can never rise above, so it can never sink below its nature. Circumstances are the creatures of natures, not natures of circumstances.

There is not a beast of the field but may trust his nature and follow it, certain that it will lead him to the best of which he is capable. But as for us, our only invincible enemy is our nature: were it sound, we could hold circumstances as lightly as Samson's withs; but it is evermore betraying us. Often, when we honestly meant to be good and noble, our miserable nature, at the first favorable juncture of circumstances, betrayed us again, and we found ourselves falling by our own hands, and bitterly felt that we were our own enemies. Heal us at the heart, and then let the world come on! We are ready for the conflict. Make us sound within, and we will stand in the evil day. We can defy circumstances, and resist the devil, if only our own breast become not a hold of traitors; if inclinations, silent, subtle, and strong as nature, do not arise to beguile us into captivity to evil.

You tell us to withstand these inclinations; not to yield to our impulses, but to subject them to reason; that is, not to follow nature, which is inward and impulsive, but to be guided by external indexes which Observation notes, Reason interprets, and Will may apply to the control of nature. That, in fact, is saying: "Do not live by your nature, but resist your nature." What a world of appalling truth comes in with that one admonition! My nature not a nature to live by! Self-regard putting me on the watch against nature! A

nature, and that the highest nature in this terrestrial system, self-injurious! This is not the handiwork, O Eternal Parent, Author of order, beauty, and love; Creator of natures, each of which is in unison with itself and in harmony with all thy other causes! What has happened since man first left thy hand?

It was strange to see three thousand men, after one hearing of a new and untried religion, accept it as their faith, and publicly enroll themselves as its disciples. It was especially strange, since the men at whose hands they, with docility, took the sacramental pledge of their conversion, were men without repute, whom they had themselves previously despised. But it is not till after some weeks have elapsed that the highest wonder of this phenomenon breaks upon us.

Human nature is liable to unaccountable illusions, and multitudes to ungovernable impulses. It may be that in a week or two we shall find those thousands of a thousand different views, as to what they had heard from Peter on the day of Pentecost, and as to the pardon and grace which he had professed to declare to them. But, as day by day we watch that throng, moral marvels come continually into view. What was so rare in human nature is now ordinary--a holy man. Persons who were as commonplace in character as can be conceived now live before us, saints. The vile have become noble, the churl self-denying, the bitter gentle, the sensual wonderfully pure. A community drawn from Jews of the ordinary standard, from persons of every variety of character and of sinfulness, is a community so pure, so far beyond what human eyes ever have seen before, that it seems as a commencement of heaven upon earth. Raised suddenly into saintship, they steadily maintain their moral elevation: first astonishing and captivating those who look on, and then withstanding all the opposition which prejudice and power can bring to crush them.

Day after day, month after month, year after year, this new and glorious life goes on. These men, lifted up from the ordinary level of sinners, continue "steadfast in the apostles' fellowship, and in breaking of bread and prayers," "filled with the Holy Ghost," rich in faith, overflowing with inward consolation: not seeing their glorified Redeemer with the eye, but more than seeing with the heart--feeling, embracing him, they "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." Their close prospect is immortality; their citizenship is in heaven; their wealth lies where change can never reduce it, nor moth corrupt, nor thief steal. Happy upon earth, and inheritors of heaven, it is naught to them that all mankind frown upon them: they know that they "are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness." Their saintliness spreads its fame to the ends of the earth--a fame that has never died until our day; and even upon our homes and our hearts are now descending the mild and holy influences of the first community called into existence by the tongue of fire.

Three thousand men permanently raised from death in sin to a life of holiness! Three thousand sinners converted into saints! Three thousand new-made saints enabled day by day to walk in the fear of God, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost! Three thousand of our brethren, weak, open to the temptings of Satan even as we are, maintaining a life in the body which almost surpasses belief, so is it marked with goodness and with purity!

This, of all the spectacles of Pentecost, is the one that speaks in deepest tones to the heart. On those three thousand we gaze, and our souls break out with adoration. Glory, honor, salvation!--for now the word "salvation" may be boldly uttered by human lips--salvation is come, is come to the race of Adam! Here we see it, not in word, not in promise, but in practical demonstration: in human beings redeemed; in our nature recovered from sin, and that not in a solitary convert, not in one ardent youth or in one exhausted worldling, but in hundreds and thousands of men with ordinary hearts and wants and employments, to whom human life has become a fellowship with God, and a straight road to eternal joy.

We have already said that we may speak of a physical miracle and of a mental miracle; and to this we may add a moral miracle. Mind, we have said, is greater than matter, and therefore a work wrought in mind is greater than one wrought in matter: it bespeaks not merely a power, but a spirit. Just as intellect sways matter, so does that for which it is hard to find a name --the moral nature, the self and substance of a man, the heart--sway the intellect. We will use the word "heart," not to signify the emotional nature, represented in Scripture by the "bowels," but the moral nature--that is, so far as man is concerned, nature. The heart commands the man. Give me a heart, and you give me a man: it carries both a mind and a body with it. Heart is the greatest thing below the sky, the nearest to the government above; that which sways intellect, and sways all things human. A work, then, wrought upon heart is the highest order of operation to which human nature can afford a sphere. Christianity professes to be a system for that which has never been otherwise professed--the renewing of bad hearts in the image of the God of heaven. To this all its powers are directed; and until this is done, Christianity is but a theory. All previous to this is but as the verbal explanation of principles by a physical philosopher, lacking his ocular demonstration.

In the physical miracle we see the God of nature accrediting revelation; in the mental miracle we see the God of mind accrediting revelation; in both these, nature counterworked, and a power above nature manifested. It is a grand and memorable thing to see the sea dried up, or to see the human mind illuminated with the lights of prophecy or the gift of tongues; but the highest manifestation of a power above nature, of a power acting against and contrary to nature, is when the bad suddenly becomes good; the impure, pure; when a clean thing is brought out of an unclean; when the earthly becomes heavenly; the sensual, spiritual; the devilish, like God; when the Ethiopian changes his skin, and the leopard his spots; when, instead of the thorn, comes up the fir tree, and, instead of the brier, comes up the myrtle tree. Here is the Ruler, not of the physical universe overruling physical nature, or of the mental universe overruling mental nature, but the Ruler of the moral universe overruling moral nature, in attestation of the gospel of his own grace.

This, though not in the technical language of theology a miracle, is so in common sense. Is it nature? Is it reducible to natural law? True, it is what is to be ordinarily expected in Christianity; but expected as what? As a fruit of natural agency, or of supernatural power accompanying that agency, and attesting it as from God? Has any system of religion ever embodied such a conception as an evidence that God was in it, and working through it, which would admit of constant application, and, at the same time, would strike deeper into the human soul than any other imaginable demonstration? This is the singular glory of the gospel. The recovery of man from his fearful fall, the creating anew of man in the image of God, the presenting the fir instead of the thorn, the myrtle instead of the brier, is the "everlasting sign, which shall not be cut off."

Other modes whereby the Lord attests and seals his messengers, whereby his operation accredits his word, have had their occasional and their glorious field; but this sign is equally adapted to all time, claims as its sphere all humanity, and addresses not the judgment merely, but the conscience of man, proclaiming to him the presence in the earth of a Power that heals human hearts, and restores the like of himself to the image of God.

Each sinner transformed into a saint is a new token of a redeeming power among men. That token declares to observers, not that there is a King in heaven, not that there is a "Father of lights," but that there is a Saviour. And this is the testimony which the world especially needs. There are few things in religion which men doubt more than whether it is possible for them, as individuals, to escape from their sins. No declaration of that possibility goes so far to convince them as seeing those whom they have known as weak as themselves, as addicted to evil as themselves, suddenly changed, and enabled all their life long

to walk "as seeing Him who is invisible." This at once says to them, "There is One who has power on earth to save from sin"; and when they know that their neighbor ascribes all to the cross of Christ, they feel that in that cross must lie an efficacy by which, if ever they are to find salvation, that salvation must come.

The regeneration of a sinner is an evidence of power in the highest sphere--moral nature; with the highest prerogative--to change the heart; and operating to the highest result--not to create originally, which is great, but to create anew, which is greater; for when the has once become evil, how infinite the glory of the act whereby again it takes its place in the eye of the universe, "very good"! The creation of saints out of sinners is the demonstration whereby the divinity of the gospel is most shortly and most convincingly displayed. Of all the Christian evidences, it alone proves that our religion does save from sin.

Again we look back to those three thousand, and in the sight we glory. Our soul is not hopelessly lost! Redemption is wrought out! Humanity may be sanctified! Communities of men may be reared who shall dwell in peace and love, and earth may become a mirror of heaven! Never, below the skies--never, until the tragic history of Adam's sons is ended, can we escape the death which sin has brought upon us, and its correlative woes. But sin itself has found a conqueror: not sin in the abstract, not sin in some philosophical impersonation, not sin in the great prince of the powers of darkness; but sin in human hearts, sin girt round with flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, flowing in veins like mine, and appealed to by temptations of the mind and of the body, just such as my own. Sin in living man has been conquered: its Conqueror reigns, his redeeming power is nigh; and in those converts at Jerusalem I see a pledge of my own deliverance, and can shout, "I, too, shall be made free from the law of sin and death!"

We see a pledge of the deliverance not only of individuals, but of multitudes; not only of families, but of thousands and tens of thousands. It has been too much the fashion for Christians to look upon pure and elevated religion as applicable only to a few. At a time when Christianity and holiness became different things, and true religion was looked upon as something not for life, but for a condition secluded from life, amounting, for practical purposes, to a burial before the time, a style of thinking crept in which has never disappeared to this day. In the Church of Rome we still find it maintained that deep holiness finds its best place away from human life, in retreat and celibacy. Among Protestants this error is rejected, yet practical religion is looked upon as something not to be expected to gain thousands at a time, and to renew communities by its sacred power, but rather to be a select blessing for a few, scattered here and there, and everywhere little discerned.

Look back to Pentecost. See Christianity, at her first step, raising up her army by thousands. She seeks not the wilderness; she seeks not the few; she affects not little, dispersed, and hidden groups. In the sight of Jerusalem, in the sight of the world, she starts as the religion of the multitude; the religion of fathers and mothers, of traders, landowners, widows, persons of all classes and of all occupations. She takes in her hand, at the very first moment, an earnest of every nation and kindred and people and tongue, of every grade and age, as if to expand forever the expectations of her disciples, and impress us with the joyful faith that her practical redemption was for the multitudes of men.

In the case of the converts of Pentecost, we are struck first with the suddenness of their conviction, then with the sharpness of it, and then with the permanence of the result.

When the humble fishermen began to preach, many who had witnessed the miracle were mocking; none had become saints; perhaps not a man in the crowd believed in the mediation of Christ, or in any other of the great doctrines of the gospel. They were adverse, not to say dogged, and, on system, enemies. His

words were strangely edged; a sword went through the very souls of these men--a sword which told the consciousness that He who wielded it was the Unseen and the Almighty: as if the whole of life were recalled, as if eternity had pressed itself, with all its weight, into one moment--processes of thought that would have required long, long meditation, and yet longer description, flashed and reflashed across the soul; and the man found himself a sinner in the midst of his own sins, accused by the past, menaced by the future, overwhelmed, confounded, discovered, and unable to wrestle against the one thought, "What must I do to be saved?"

The sharpness of this conviction is equally amazing with its suddenness. Why could not the men control themselves? Why not go to their homes and think? Why not take time to deliberate? Why not avoid exposure to the public eye? Why, but because, wounded to the very quick, they forgot all other considerations, and wanted to be healed? They saw, they felt themselves fallen into the hands of God; and, for the moment, the eye, the voice, the opinion of man was shut out from their thoughts.

If a man really saw an angel, or one "risen from the dead," we should expect that all consideration of bystanders would forsake him in the awe of the moment. And so, if in an instant a supernatural power opens the unseen world to the soul, with its one eternal Light, its heaven and its hell, although the view of these must be imperfect and confused, yet if it is a view, a sudden view, it must shoot fear, wonder, awe, through and through the soul, till man and man's opinion are as little thought of as fashion by a woman fallen into a steamer's foaming wake.

We find those who were affected by these sudden impressions going on and on, month after month, sustaining in the ordinary walks of life the profession of saints; walking worthy, not only of themselves, not only of their teachers, but even of the Lord; leading such a life that "He that sanctifieth, and they which are sanctified, are all of one; for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren." This steadfastness in purity and piety, "in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers"; in liberality such as no community had ever practiced; in "gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people," shows that the fountains of life had been sweetened, the depths of the soul reached; touched, changed, renewed.

The suddenness of the change shows that it is effected by supernatural means. Indeed, natural means can never change a nature, though they may greatly modify its manifestations. When we want to produce any moral impression on human nature that shall be permanent, we trust to slow and lengthened training. To turn a man from his ways, to turn him against his own interests, to lead him to place all he holds dear in continual jeopardy, purely for the sake of goodness here and happiness hereafter, is what, in any natural scheme, we must attempt by beginning early and by laboring long. But if we are to depend not on natural processes, but on the power of God, then time ceases to be a matter of account. The Infinite declares his presence by accomplishing in a moment that upon which we had gladly spent a life. Whatever reasons may be advanced in favor of gradual awakenings rather than sudden ones, this at least stands on the other side, that the sudden conversion conveys to all bystanders a much more striking impression of power above that of man. What is gradual may be readily ascribed, by the ignorant or the unbelieving, to the natural results of human processes. They may say, "The wonder would be, if, with so much teaching, so many homilies, directed to the one end of bringing man to consideration for his soul, he was not gradually brought to it." But when, by some single and perhaps simple message, the work of conversion is done in an instant, it looks like the raising of the dead. As to bystanding sinners, it first stirs their wonder, then moves their conscience; and if they see such cases multiplied, the feeling falls upon them--"It is the mighty power of God!"

Christianity was established by the creation of Christians.

In the words, "Continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers," we see the effect of the regeneration of individuals on the character of a community. From a number of good men at once arose a united and fraternal society. Statesmen and philanthropists, occupied with the idea of forming happy nations, frequently look to good institutions as the means of doing so, but find that when institutions are more than a certain distance in advance of the people, instead of being a blessing, they become a snare and a confusion. The reason of this is obvious: good institutions to a certain extent presuppose a good people. Where the degree of goodness existing in the people does not in some measure correspond with that presupposed in the institutions, the latter can never be sustained. As the organ, embodiment, and conservators of individual goodness, the value of good institutions is incalculable; and he is one of man's greatest benefactors who makes any improvement in the joinings and bearings of the social machine; but as a means of regeneration, political instruments are impotent. Good institutions given to a depraved and unprincipled people, end in bringing that which is good into disrepute. In fact, it would be more correct to say that institutions which are good for a people of good principles are bad for a people destitute of principle. The only way to the effectual regeneration of society is the regeneration of individuals: make the tree good, and the fruit will be good; make good men, and you will easily find and sustain good institutions. Here is the fault of statesmen--they forget the heart of the individual.

On the other hand, have not those who see and feel the importance of first seeking the regeneration of individuals, too often insufficiently studied the application of Christianity to social evils? When the result of Christian teaching, long addressed to a people, has raised the tone of conscience; when a large number of persons embodying true Christianity in their own lives are diffused among all ranks, a foundation is laid for social advancement; but it does not follow that, by spontaneous development, the principles implanted in the minds of the people make to themselves the most fitting and Christian embodiment. Fearful social evils may coexist with a state of society wherein many are holy, and all have a large amount of Christian light. Base usages fostering intemperance, alienation of class from class in feeling and interest, systematic frauds in commerce, neglect of workmen by masters, neglect of children by their own parents, whole classes living by sin; usages checking marriage and encouraging licentiousness; human dwellings which make the idea of home odious and the existence of modesty impossible, are but specimens of the evils which may be left age after age, cursing a people among whom Christianity is the recognized standard of society. To be indifferent to these things is as unfaithful to Christian morals, on the one hand, as hoping to remedy them without spreading practical holiness among individuals is astray from truth, on the other.

The most dangerous perversion of the gospel, viewed as affecting individuals, is, when it is looked upon as a salvation for the soul after it leaves the body, but no salvation from sin while here. The most dangerous perversion of it, viewed as affecting the community, is, when it is looked upon as a means of forming a holy community in the world to come, but never in this. Nothing short of the general renewal of society ought to satisfy any soldier of Christ; and all who aim at that triumph should draw much inspiration from the King's own words: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." Much as Satan glories in his power over an individual, how much greater must be his glorying over a nation embodying, in its laws and usages, disobedience to God, wrong to man, and contamination to morals! To destroy all national holds of evil; to root sin out of institutions; to hold up to view the gospel ideal of a righteous nation; to confront all unwholesome public usages with mild, genial, and ardent advocacy of what is purer, is one of the first duties of those whose position or mode of thought gives them an influence on general questions.

In so doing they are at once glorifying the Redeemer, by displaying the benignity of his influence over human society, and removing hindrances to individual conversion, some of which act by direct incentive to vice, others by upholding a state of things the acknowledged basis of which is, "Forget God."

Satan might be content to let Christianity turn over the subsoil, if he is in perpetuity to sow the surface with thorns and briars; but the gospel is come to renew the face of the earth. Among the wheat, the tares, barely distinguishable from it, may be permitted to grow to the last; but the field is to be wheat, not tares; wheat, not briars; a fair, fenced, plowed, sowed, and fruitful field, albeit weeds, resembling the crop, be interspersed.

The same words, "The apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and breaking of bread, and prayers," indicate the various exercises of religion, in which all Churches and individual Christians ought to "continue steadfast." It was not a "preaching Church," or a "praying Church," the one in opposition to the other: they had both "doctrine" (teaching) and "prayers." The idea of separating these two, or of setting the one up above the other, is foreign to the religion of the New Testament. They are no ministers sent of God who have not the gift of being "apt to teach." They may be good and useful men; but the proof that any one never was designed by the Head of all for a certain position, is, that he never qualified him for it. All the authorities in the universe cannot make him an ambassador for Christ, to whom Christ himself has given no power to beseech men to be reconciled to God, no power to warn every man and teach every man, that he may present every man perfect. The pretense of ~ Christianity without ministers, served by a priesthood who can manipulate, read prayers that others wrote, organize solemnities, and keep times and seasons, but who cannot "rightly divide the word of truth"; cannot "preach the gospel with demonstration of the Spirit, and with power"; cannot do anything but what the most senseless or the most wicked of men could do, if drilled to it--is one of those marvels of imposition before which we are at once abashed and indignant--indignant that, with the New Testament still living, men dare palm this upon us for Christianity; and abashed that human nature is ready to accept such a travesty.

On the other hand, the gift of teaching was not exercised to the exclusion, or even to the repression, of that of prayer. The disciples did not come together only when some one was prepared with a deep and weighty discourse on points of essential doctrine. Prayer was one of their habitual exercises--not merely hearkening to the solitary prayer of one gifted preacher, in the congregation, before or after his sermon; but prayers in frequent and familiar fellowship, prayers prompted then and there, without book, and without study; prayers of private disciples who had no higher gift, but who could pour out their requests to God; prayers by men with provincial speech, and all the marks of being "unlearned and ignorant," but also with clear signs that the Spirit was helping their infirmities, and teaching them what they should pray for as they ought.

Suppose that Peter had some day stood up, and said: "Brethren, all things must be done in order. The use of vulgar tones and uneducated language is unseemly. Henceforth none shall pray in our assemblies but those who can do so without exposing us to the ridicule of the respectable. Indeed, to secure propriety we have prepared proper forms, and all our future praying shall be from these litanies and collects written here, the language of which is the most beautiful of human compositions, and may, indeed, be called faultless." Would not this have altered the history of the primitive Church? Were not prayers, simple, unpremeditated, united--prayers of the well-taught apostle, prayers of the accomplished scholar, prayers of the rough but fervent peasant, prayers of the new but zealous convert, prayers which importuned and wrestled with an instant and irrepressible urgency--were they not an essential part of that religion which holy fire had kindled, and which daily supplications alone could fan?

Surely no Church can be entitled to call herself a praying Church because, by a trained priesthood, she often reads old and admirable forms of prayer. Against such forms, suitably mingled with the public services of the Church, we mean to say no word. We use, admire, and enjoy them; but, with the Acts of the Apostles open, it is impossible to repress astonishment that any man should imagine that frequent and formal reading of the best forms ever written, unmixed even by one outburst of spontaneous supplication from minister or people, has any pretense to be looked on as the interceding grace, the gift of supplication bestowed upon the primitive Church. That in such modes holy and prayerful hearts may and do pour themselves out to God, we not only concede, but would maintain against all who questioned it. That such prayers are in many respects preferable to the one set prayer of one dry man, long, stiff, and meager, wherewith congregations are often visited, is too plain to need acknowledgment.

But gifts of prayer are part of the work and prerogative of the Holy Ghost; are of the very essence of a Church; and deliberately to shut the door against them, or so to frame ecclesiastical arrangements that they are practically buried except when possessed by the minister, the well-educated, or the influential, is a plain departure from apostolic Christianity. In no form is the tongue of fire more impressive, more calculated to convince men that a power above nature is working, than when poor men, who could no more preach than they could fly, and could not suitably frame a paragraph on any secular topic, lift up a reverent voice, amid a few fellow-Christians, and in strains of earnest trust, perhaps of glorious emotion, and even of sublime conception as to things Divine, plead in prayer with their Redeemer. The pentecostal Christianity was not framed on the ideal of an accomplished circle, but on that of a Church--a Church including learned and unlearned, the refined and the rustic, the honored evangelist, prophet, or apostle, and the humble member without public gifts; but all rejoicing as members of one brotherhood, and each, in fitting time and mode, taking his share, according to his gifts in the active work of mutual edification. A Church, to be apostolic, must have ministers powerful in preaching, and members mighty in prayer.

They continued steadfast "in breaking of bread." Hence it is plain that it was not a purely spiritual system of worship, too spiritual to stoop to our Lord's ordained symbols, or by the breaking of bread to show forth his death. Besides breaking of bread, and doctrine, and prayers, "fellowship" is distinctly named. It was, then, not a Church where the "teaching" of the minister was taken for his fellowship with the people, and their "breaking of bread" for their fellowship one with another; but where, in addition to public teaching, sacraments, and prayers, was another beauty of primitive Christianity, "fellowship." Fellowship is family life, forming a circle, smaller or larger, to the members of which joys, sorrows, interests, and undertakings are of common concern and matter of common conversation. Between the life of man as an individual and as a member of a great community lies a vast region of affections, which can be filled up only by family relations. In public an individual does not indulge his affections: the greater the multitude, the more is the heart in privacy. The citizen who stands honorably with the public, and yet has no wife, child, or friend to partake of his life, is lonely; his place in the town council or the national legislature may be filled, and all the relations therein involved well sustained to him by others; but he lives without fellowship--if from bereavement, men compassionate him; if from choice, they turn cold at the thought of him.

It would have been strange had a Church meant for man, in all his aspects--individual, domestic, national--left the space between the individual and the public unoccupied; so that Christian life must have been divided into secret and solitary intercourse with God, and public solemnities, wherein each was a stranger to each: no family life, no circles of interwoven hearts, no unbosoming of joys, sorrows, and cares, no communication "one to another" as to the soul's health or progress. Had such a cardinal omission been traceable in Christianity, it might have raised many a question as to how the tenderest

elements of our nature--the social ones--had been disregarded in forming a bond designed to unite all men in one loving brotherhood.

But the spiritual life of the primitive Church is redolent of family feeling. You have not there the solemn and solitary man, who has things passing between himself and his Creator, of which he never breathes a word, though he will take his place in public assemblies, where his own heart is as effectually concealed as if he were in a desert; who regards any approach toward fellowship of spirit as an inroad on privacy; any inquiry for his soul's health as a stranger's intermeddling; any opening of hearts as weakness: who can live his religious life alone, and loves to do so, except when he comes into public; who wants no friends, fellow-helpers, or inner circle of companions; and, indeed, who loftily doubts whether sociality in religious life is a very good thing. That man who can find fellow-citizens among the children of God, but not family friends, may be a very good Christian, but not of the primitive stamp.

What a glow of family heartiness runs through the New Testament! Instead of stiff souls, always either dressed for the public eye, or shut up in solitude, you have brothers, sisters, friends, lovers, who cling to each other by mutual attraction, and between whom the common talk often runs on their conversion, their conflicts, and their glorious foretaste of eternal joy. In writing to them, the apostles are manifestly addressing persons to whom one great event has occurred, the surpassing interest of which keeps it in continual remembrance. Once they were foolish, dark, wicked--carried away by evil passions, without God, and without hope; but a wonderful change has passed upon them--a deliverance from the power of darkness, and a translation into the kingdom of God's dear Son; a change as if from being aliens to be of the household of God; as from darkness to light, as from life to death. To this great salvation, accomplished for and in them, the allusions made by their apostolic teachers are so free, incidental, and frequent, as clearly to show that it was a theme of unreserved and joyful thanksgiving and wonder in their communications with one another. The dignity of the apostolic office does not prevent frank and touching allusions to personal conversion and to previous character, as also to present attainments; and, on the other hand, even the babe in Christ is one whose happy experience is matter of open congratulation: "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you, for His name's sake."

The incidental proofs of the spirit which animated the first Christians, as to fellowship with one another, would be perfectly conclusive if they stood alone; but some important passages of the apostolic letters are plainly meant to preserve this spirit forever in the Church. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom: teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (Colossians iii. 16.) Here is an injunction, not to the ministry, but to ordinary Christians, to be well acquainted with the word of God, with a view to the edification of one another, by teaching and admonition; but teaching and admonition which, so far from having the regularity of preaching, may even be, and ought frequently to be, in "psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs." Such counsel could never be given, had a system been adopted wherein every word of teaching or admonition must fall from the lips of the minister. Throughout the New Testament the system of the Church is assumed to be such as to call forth the gift of every member, no matter of what order it might be; and the active cooperation of each one is enjoined to promote the edification of all. "From whom [Christ] the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." (Ephesians iv. 16.) Here "every joint" is to supply somewhat, "every part" to perform its "effectual working"; and by this means the body is to increase, "edifying itself" in love. No system can be made to accord with this passage, any more than with the general spirit of the New Testament, wherein the pulpit is the sole

provision for instruction, admonition, and exhortation; the great bulk of the members of the Church being merely recipients, each living a stranger to the spiritual concerns of the others, and no "effectual working" of every joint and every part for mutual strengthening being looked for. It is not enough that arrangements to promote mutual edification be permitted, at the discretion of individual pastors or officers--means of grace wherein fellow-Christians shall on set purpose have "fellowship" one with another, "speak often one to another, exhort one another, confess their faults one to another," and "pray one for another," shall teach and "admonish one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs," are not dispensable appendages, but of the essence of a Church of Christ.

Some make light of any "teaching" which could be gained by the mutual exercise of the gifts of private members of the Church--not always either educated or wise--and think that only well-prepared addresses from the pulpit are instructive. The regular ministry of the word is undoubtedly the prime source of teaching, and on its vigor and clearness the life of all auxiliary agency will ever depend; but those who would reject the practical and home teaching of free-hearted "fellowship," little consider that to persons of ample mind, or slow heart--that is, to the majority of mankind--the great problems, "What must I do to be saved? What is believing? Whereby shall I know that I inherit glory? Am I, or am I not, deceiving myself? How can I overcome this temptation, the sorest that ever beset a man? How can I grow in grace?" and such like, have often more light shed upon them by the plain statement of an individual as to how Divine mercy solved them in his own case than by any general explanation. In practical religion, as in all things practical, instruction is miserably incomplete, even though correct as far as it goes, if it does not bring before the student or inquirer actual examples of the process he hears described. A minister surrounded by bands of lively members, who with glad and single heart say, as the Psalmist, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will tell you what he hath done for my soul," has at hand "living epistles" which he may send any inquirer to read; has practical demonstrations of his pulpit doctrines, by which he may at once convince and enlighten the doubter. One who seeks no such auxiliaries, who permits or encourages the frigid habit of walking each one with a sealed bosom, rests all his hopes of success on the words of his own lips, and that without scriptural sanction.

Some defend a plain departure from scriptural religion by openly questioning the utility of Christian fellowship. One writer of note is so bold as to say that the spiritual experience of believers is "better never spoken about." Though this sentiment is completely alien to the spirit of both Old and New Testament piety, it is the natural fruit of the constitution of too many of our Protestant Churches. In them the social element of religion has been woefully overlooked. Provision is made for doctrine, for prayers, for breaking of bread; but none for fellowship. A Christian may be a member of a Church, and yet walk all his way alone, no one knowing, or caring to know, of his conflicts or his joys. If he is tempted, he may stand; if overcome, he may get restored; if happy, he may hide his peace among his secrets, and ask no one to rejoice with him; if he had lost his pearl, and has found it again, he may be silent, for his neighbors are not wont to be called together to take share in another's cares and joys. There is something fearfully chilling in a state of things of which this is too fair a description. Religion is a life to be lived in fellowship; a conflict to be sustained, not singly, but in bands; a redemption, of which we are to impart the joy; a hope, an anticipation, of which the comforts are to be gladly told to those who "fear the Lord." We once heard a contrite inquirer after spiritual comfort say, "It is ten years since I was received a member of such a Church, and during all that time no one has ever said a word to me about my soul." And this is the case with tens of thousands who are members of Churches which provide only for public instruction and ordinances, not for the social fellowship of saints. It is a mournful example of the effect of overlooking any one of the essential features of vital Christianity; and a fair comment on the ungenial notion that religious

experience had better never be spoken about.

How would the Psalms be altered, could we reconstruct them on the principle that all about the state of the soul--its joys, sorrows, temptations, wanderings, and deliverances--had better be kept in prudent reserve from the knowledge of our brethren! How would the apostolic letters lose in dignity, tenderness, and power, as well as in instruction, could this frigid law of isolation once stiffen them!

If we turn from Religion in her own person, as viewed in holy Writ, to look at a reflection of her in one of the best mirrors, the "Pilgrim's Progress," how would Bunyan have handled pilgrims who would stiffly or prudently close up their bosom? A Christian, a Faithful, a Hopeful, who had nothing to say "one to another," as they traveled on, respecting the beginning of God's work in their heart, their escapes, solaces, temptations, and slips; a Christiana, a Mercy, a Greatheart, an Honest, a Ready-to-Halt, who would interchange no experience; holy damsels and genial Gaiuses, who would have no questions to ask on such matters, would be a set of people whom Bunyan would not know, and whom, we suspect, he would castigate with good will. Indeed, he has given such some cutting stripes, as it is, in the person of Mr. Talkative, who, though fluent on doctrines and such points, was very reserved on experimental religion. Faithful, wishing to know how he was to bring him to a point, said to Christian, "What would you have me to do?"

"Why, go to him, and enter into some serious discourse on the power of religion; and ask him plainly, when he has approved of it (for that he will), whether this thing be set up in his heart, house, or conversation."

Faithful having described how a work of grace "discovers itself when it is in the heart of a man," puts the plain question, "Do you experience this first part of the description of it?"

Talkative at first began to blush, but, recovering himself, thus replied: "You come now to experience, to conscience, and God; and to appeal to him for justification of what is spoken. This kind of discourse I did not expect; nor am I disposed to give an answer to such questions, because I count not myself bound thereto, unless you take upon you to be a catechiser; and though you should do so, yet I refuse to make you my judge."

How many professedly religious men, who think themselves very different people from Mr. Talkative, and in many respects are so, would, nevertheless, feel much as he did, if any Faithful came as abruptly close home on the question of personal experience!

Banish from the "Pilgrim's Progress" the social element, the fellowship of hearts, the free recital of the Lord's dealings with each pilgrim, and you would cool its interest down to a point which, doubtless, would be decorous in the eyes of some, but would never touch the many.

"But is not what you call 'fellowship'--the meeting of the lay members of the Church for prayer, praise, and recital of experience--liable to be abused?" Most certainly, and that in several ways. But is not preaching the gospel liable to be abused, so as to be merely the means of displaying a man's talent, or of diffusing error? And baptism, so as to be put instead of the "renewing of the Holy Ghost"? And the Lord's Supper, so as to be put instead of holy living? When we want to learn what is Christian, we never ask, "What is incapable of being abused?" for we should find no answer; but, "What accords with the word of God?" And it does accord with the word of God, spirit and letter, that "they who fear the Lord" should "speak often one to another"; that the forgiven and happy sinner should have companions around him, before whom he may

celebrate the mercies of his Redeemer; that the weak should not droop unknown, nor those whose love is waxing cold be left to grow cold unwarmed. A Church wherein, from the minister in the pulpit down, every man in his own order, "according to the grace that is given to" him, is called to exercise his gift, and every member to lend his "effectual working" toward the general life and strength--wherein hearts are open and fellowship is free, can alone answer to the New Testament ideal of a Church. How much of the failure of the various Protestant Churches to maintain religion at a high point of vitality for any great length of time consecutively, or to diffuse it generally among the nations which have come under their spiritual care, is to be ascribed to their neglect of the social element of scriptural piety, we do not profess to determine; but let those Churches who, as to this point, have been taught to seek after primitive spirit and usage, faithfully and immovably guard the inestimable treasure which has been committed to them.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/william-arthur/section-iv-effects-upon-the-world/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net