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A Primitive
Missionary Church.

A SERMON.

BY H. L. HASTINGS, EDITOR OF "THE CHRISTIAN."

Preached at the Union Chapel, South Hackney, London,
May 14, 1882, in aid of the

"Livingstone Inland Mission on the Congo."

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H. L. HASTINGS.

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“For from you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in everyplace your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything. For they themselves show us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.” 1 Thess. 1:8-10.

The Thessalonian church is marked by several peculiarities. One of them is the almost unqualified approval which it received from the apostle Paul. To the Galatians he wrote, “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?” Gal. 3:1. To the Philippians he wrote, with tears, of many who were enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction.” Phil. 3:18, 19. To the Colossians he said, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.” Col. 2:8. To the Corinthians he wrote, sharply reproofing their errors, disorders, and sins, and saying, ⁴⁴“I fear lest when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness, and fornication, and lasciviousness which they have committed.” 2 Cor. 12:21. Thus most of his Epistles contained words of warning and reproof. And when our Lord, the faithful and true Witness, addressed the churches of Asia, along with kindly commendation, there was almost always solemn rebuke. “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.... Repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly.” “Repent, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.”

“Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” Rev. 2, 3.

In such words as these did the Holy Spirit portray the faults of the various churches mentioned in the Scripture. But the apostle, writing to the Thessalonians, says, “We give thanks to God always for you all.” ...“Ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.” “When Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity ... we were comforted over you, in all our affliction and distress, by your faith. For now we live if ye stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy *for your sakes* before our God? ... We are bound to thank God *always for you*, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth; so that we ourselves *glory in you* in the churches of God,

for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure. ... We are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord...and we have confidence in the Lord touching you, that ye both do, and will do, the things which we command you.”

There was no need of asking, “If ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?” as in the Epistle to the Colossians; there was no fear that he had bestowed his labor upon them “in vain,” as in the case of the Galatians; there was no need of a labored argument to prove the resurrection of the dead, as in the Epistle to the Corinthians; there was no tearful warning against men whose glory was their shame, as in the Epistle to the Philippians; and though, in one passage, he exhorts the Thessalonians to “study to be quiet, and work with their own hands,” remarking that there were some among them which walked disorderly, ‘working not at all,’ and exhorting them with quietness to work and eat their own bread (2 Thess. 3:12), with this single exception, throughout those two Epistles there is one devout Voice of thanksgiving to God for their work of faith, their labor of love, their patience of hope; and a constant commendation of the Christian zeal and fidelity.

The Thessalonian church was especially a missionary church. “From you *sounded out the word of the Lord*, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad.” Throughout this region, extending over an area of hundreds of miles, notwithstanding all the difficulties and disabilities under which they labored, the word of God was “sounded out,” and the church of the Thessalonians was well and widely known as a faithful, zealous missionary church. It would be well if every church resembled, in these respects, the church of the Thessalonians, and caused constant thanksgiving.

In searching for the causes of the characteristics which marked the Thessalonian church, we may first advert to the circumstances under which they were converted, and to the men whose labors led them to the Lord. A stream does not rise higher than its fountain. A worldly and luxurious ministry can only produce a worldly and luxurious church. A lukewarm ministry will certainly have a church that is no warmer than its leaders and teachers. Under what ministry, then, was the Thessalonian church established? Says the apostle Paul, “Ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.”

When Paul and Silas were pursuing their missionary work, they visited the city of Philippi, and there they were followed through the streets by a

“spiritual medium,” who said, “these men are the servants of the Most High God, which show unto us the way of salvation;” quite as the lying spirits of the present day say many things that are very true; for one who should lie all the time would not be believed at any time. But the apostle was not disposed to have his credentials countersigned by the devil, and so he turned and rebuked the unclean spirit, and commanded it to come out of her. The consequence was, the men who were making money out of this “spiritual medium” got in a great rage because their hope of gain was gone, and arrested the apostles, and had them well whipped, and lodged in jail that night. They took it very calmly, and, with their backs sore from the scourge, and their feet fast in the stocks, at midnight they had a little prayer-meeting in the prison, and then they were so joyful in their afflictions that they sang a hymn and offered praise to God. By that time an earthquake thundered along that way, the prison walls were shaken, the doors flew open, the fetters and bands were loosed, and the jailer came in, frightened, supposing the prisoners were escaping, and was about to kill himself, when Paul said, “Do thyself no harm; for we are all here.” Convinced of sin, the jailer brought them out, and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God, with all his house.” Before morning the great question was settled with that family. They had found salvation in Christ. In the morning the magistrates, probably having heard of the earthquake, sent and ordered the jailer to open the jail door, and let those men out. But they found that, though it was easy to get them into prison, it was more difficult to get them out. They were quite contented where they were, and had no thought of being secretly discharged; and Paul replied to the jailer: “They have beaten us openly, uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? nay, verily; but let them come themselves, and fetch us out.” And then the magistrates came and besought them, and brought them out, they visited the brethren and comforted them, and departed and went to Thessalonica, and preached the gospel of God there; and the Thessalonians “received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost. From such ministers, just out of prison, and still bearing the marks of the scourge upon their backs, the Thessalonians heard the words of life, and were trained and nourished up in the doctrines of God our Saviour.

Having thus glanced at the history of the foundation of this church, let us look at the position which they occupied. The apostle says: "For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." This was their position. First, they turned from idols; second, they served the living God; third, they waited for his Son from heaven. They were not waiting to die. People die fast enough without waiting for death. No one waits to die. Men wait for something they delight in, and are looking for. People talk much about preparing to die; but no Scrip- true commands it, and I know of no persons who seem willing to die until the doctor tells them they cannot get well. It is not the natural inclination of a healthy man to prepare to die. The business of a man is to *live* to live as long as he can, and as well as he can. And when he cannot live any longer, then he may die; but the great business of a Christian is, not to stand looking down into the grave, preparing to die;—what men need to prepare for is to *live*, and serve God today, and do good in the world, turning from idols, serving the living God, and waiting for his Son from heaven.

The child of God has fixed his faith in One who is triumphant over death, who has "brought life and immortality to light;" and out of whose open sepulcher streamed the glory of an immortal life, and who shall "appear the second time, without sin unto salvation." And so the Christian treads upon death as upon a conquered foe, and triumphs over death as a fleeting shadow, saying, "All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours."

To such a church as this, the apostle had an opportunity to write out of the fullness of his heart. He could not write thus to the Corinthians, for some of them disputed his apostleship, others denied the resurrection, others were given to immorality; and he was forced to address them with reproofs and warnings, and had no opportunity to pour out his heart as he did to the Thessalonian church; the outflow of divine truth being constantly hindered by the defective condition of the church. But in the case of the Thessalonians the field was clear. However much he wept over the Philippians, however much he bewailed the Corinthians, however much he was distressed by the conduct of the Galatians, he could say to the Thessalonians, "We give thanks to God upon every remembrance of you."

Now I call especial attention to the prominence which the apostle gives, in these Epistles to the Thessalonians, to the great hope of the

glorious coming of the Lord from heaven. In the first chapter he says they “turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God; and to *wait for his Son from heaven;*” in the second chapter he says, “What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ *at his coming?*” In the third chapter he says, “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you; to the end he may stablish your hearts unblamable in holiness before God, even our Father, *at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*, with all his saints.” In the fourth chapter he writes, “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive, and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent them which are asleep: for the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout.” In the fifth chapter he speaks of the “times and the seasons,” concerning which he has no need to write unto them, for “the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.... but ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief... We are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.” And again, in the twenty-third verse, “The very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless *at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,*”—as the revised version properly renders it. So we observe in every chapter in this Epistle, the apostle refers to the “blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” Let us glance at the second Epistle to the Thessalonians; and there we read in the first chapter, “It is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; and to you who *are* troubled rest, with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be *revealed from heaven* with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; *when he shall come* to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe.” Again, we read in the second chapter, that they were not to be troubled in spirit, as if the day of Christ was upon them, but that, before that day, there should come an apostasy, and, finally, that wicked one should be revealed, “whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the *brightness of his coming.*” Again, we read in the third chapter, “The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the *patient waiting for*

Christ.” Now all these quotations are taken from two consecutive leaves of a pocket Bible. In these two Epistles are a dozen passages written by the apostle Paul, which point directly and emphatically to the coming glory of the personal appearing of the Son of God. These Epistles contain more writing on that subject than would be found in some whole volumes of sermons by modern preachers; and yet, with the Scriptures gleaming thus with light, there are men so blind that they say they cannot find this truth in the Bible. I believe them. There are many persons who can find nothing there; but it is not because there is nothing there to find; it is because of defects in their spiritual vision. “How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?”

From these quotations it is apparent that the Thessalonian church was peculiar in its faith. They had no disposition to deny the resurrection, for they were looking for it, and rejoicing in hope of it. They were not spoiled with vain philosophy; they were not bewitched with mistaken opinions; they did not turn back to Jewish observances and customs. They were looking forward, with their eye fixed on the bright and morning Star; with the searching gaze of faith they were waiting for the Son of God from heaven; they were working while they waited, and waiting while they worked.

But we meet sometimes with an objection. People tell us that if we look for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ, it takes away all interest and enterprise in Christian work; that it would be an end of all missionary labors, an end of all efforts to advance the cause of Christ. Because, if the world is not to be converted, we may as well cease from our labors, and sit down, and allow things to drift as they will. That is one view of the subject. To agree with that view, we should read the apostle’s language thus: “The *hope of success* constraineth us.” Upon that theory we should expect the apostle to say that “God hath visited the Gentiles to save *all of them.*” But we read rather, that “the *love of Christ* constraineth us;” we read that God has visited the Gentiles “to take *oat* of them a people for his name;” and instead of finding the apostle saying, “I am become all things to all men, that I might save *all,*” he says, “I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save *some*” [For a fuller discussion of this important topic, consult *The Reign of Christ on Earth, or the Voice of the Church in all Ages Concerning the Coming and Kingdom of the Redeemer;* by D. T. Taylor, with an elaborate preface by H. L. Hastings. To be had of the publishers of this tract.] And this is the true and only Scriptural position. Nor does the faith that all the world is to be converted by preaching the gospel, produce the greatest imaginable zeal. I went this Sunday morning to the “Bird-fair” in

Bethnal Green. I saw, I suppose, ten thousand men there, in the heart of this city, with their birds, and their merchandise, buying, and selling, and chaffering, and engrossed in all sorts of worldliness and ungodliness;—and how many of the ministers and laymen of London, who are converting the world, were down there to rebuke them, and warn them, and tell them to flee from the wrath to come? Not one! Ten thousand heathen this blessed Sunday, in a single street, and of all the ministers and preachers in this great city, not one was there to warn them and win them to Christ. And I stood up in that crowd, with one Christian woman, who believed the day of judgment was coming, and tried to warn them to flee from the wrath to come. I do not find that this pleasing theory that things are growing brighter and better makes people especially zealous. I find that men get comfortably settled in this world, and, feeling very sure that there is no trouble coming, they are quite likely to rest at their ease and allow the world to drift toward perdition, and think that everything is going on right.

But how did this faith, which laid hold upon the hope of the kingdom of God and appearing of the Lord in his majesty, affect the Thessalonian church? Did it make them idlers? Did it make them dreamers? Did it make them enthusiasts?

In the first place, it kept them sound in doctrine. They had no time to talk over the Platonic nonsense in which the Corinthian church had got befogged. Paul had no trouble to prove to them the resurrection of the dead; they were looking for it, and expecting that the Lord would descend, the trumpet sound, the dead arise, and they go home with them to glory. It would have been breath wasted to have argued with *them* about the sacrifices, and the temple veil, about days, and months, and times, and years; they had gone past all that; they were looking for the eternal Sabbath, and they were waiting for the great High Priest to come “the second time without sin unto salvation.”

This faith made them a laborious, diligent, believing, active church, and especially a missionary church. Said the apostle, “We give thanks to God always *for you all*.” What a character, this, for a church! There are some churches which would be remembered for the splendor of their edifices, the height of their steeples; for their altars, and candles, and bowings, and stoopings, and kneelings, and risings; there are churches which would be remembered for their bickerings, and strivings, and disputes about trifling things; there are churches which would be remembered for their covetousness, their close-fistedness, and their membership made up of men who love the world and do not love the Lord; but of the Thessalonian church the apostle could say, We remember

your work of faith ; we remember your labor of love; we remember your patience of hope; “knowing, beloved, your election of God.”

The Thessalonians had received a gospel which came, not in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost; and Paul says, “Ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia; for from you *sounded out the word of the Lord*, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place, your faith to God-ward is spread abroad.”

How the Thessalonians did all this work I do not know. They had no printing presses, they had no tract societies, they had no religious periodicals. If they wanted an epistle they must write it, and if they desired another it might require a week to copy it; but, somehow, they “sounded out the word of the Lord.” They preached by the wayside; they bore the gospel when they went to market; wherever business or duty led them, they “sounded out the word of the Lord.” And so this church reached its marked eminence in the New Testament, as a model for Christians, an example to all them that believed in Macedonia and Achaia, as, I doubt not, it would be a good ensample to many that believe, in London and elsewhere; a church that had turned from idols, a church that served the living God, a church that waited for his Son from heaven, a church that sounded out the word of the Lord, and the fame of whose faith was spread abroad; and which was known, far and near, as a people that served the living and true God, and waited for his Son from heaven. [*Persons desiring to pursue this subject are referred to the author’s volume “Thessalonica, or The Model Church ; a sketch of Primitive Christianity.”*]

And now the question arises whether we desire to be reckoned with such a band of Christians as these; whether we have the interest that they had in the things which blessed them, and which will bless us; whether we have turned from idols, to serve the living God, and wait for his Son from heaven; whether we, eighteen hundred years further down the stream of time, are still looking for Him for whom they looked, and waiting for Him for whom they waited.

It has become customary, in these times, to declare that the world is yet in its infancy. The Thessalonians held no such faith. The leaders whom they followed said, “Now once in *the end of the world* hath He appeared, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” The teachers by whom they were instructed believed, “ This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: And it shall come to pass *in the last days*, saith God, I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh.” They had evidently entered upon the last half of the earth’s long pilgrimage. They were in “the last times;” and upon them the ends of the world had come. They were looking, not backward to the cross, but forward to the crown; not back to a Paradise that was lost,

but forward to a Paradise to be restored. And it was their faith in Christ who is to come, conquering and reigning, which made earth to them a place of pilgrimage, and which made them diligent in service, that they might be “found of him in peace” when he should appear.

And today a large proportion of the men who are laboring, and spreading the light of God with energy and power throughout the land and world, are looking for the same glory. And you are called upon to strengthen their hands, to bear them up and help them forward in their work, and in this way to sound out the word of the Lord. It is written in the Psalms that “Ethiopia shall *eagerly* stretch out her hands unto God Psalm 68:31) and in the dark continent of Africa—so long bound, and crushed, and burdened beneath oppressions, idolatries and superstitions—God is opening the way and causing the light to shine. Christians have now such opportunities as they never had before to sound out the word of the Lord throughout all that region. “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come.” Matt. 24:14. And we have something to do to accomplish this work. We cannot delegate our duty to others; it is our business as Christians, every one of us, to be diligent, to be faithful, that we maybe found of Him in peace.

If, soon after our Lord had left the world, when five thousand believed on him, each of these had, within the year, led one sinner to Christ, and if this ten thousand had, within the next year, repeated this act, and thus continued from year to year; in less than twenty years every man, woman, and child on the globe might have been converted. But eighteen hundred years have rolled away, and today seven hundred millions of souls are outside of the hearing of the gospel, and are waiting for the glad news to be carried to them, that they may be warned of judgment and won to Christ. And you who love the Lord, and who wait for his Son from heaven, should gird yourselves with strength, and lift up your hearts in prayer and your voices in testimony, and work while the day lasts, for the night cometh wherein no man can work. Shadows of dark and terrible gloom seem gathering. Clouds and darkness are round about Him; and he comes to judge the nations who have rejected the gospel and refused to learn righteousness. It is our time now to spread the good news among those who are sitting in the darkness. And you must do the work that God has given you, as lights in the world, as a city set on a hill that cannot be hid.

Beloved, be faithful in your own personal service. Let the lives you live be lives of faith in the Son of God. Let your testimony and your life be so consonant, that men shall know that you have been with Jesus and

learned of him. And then stretch out the open and liberal hand, and put forth your efforts with zeal, fidelity, and affection, to win souls from the wrath to come.

And you who have never known the Lord, and who have never tasted of his grace,—how shall it fare with you in that day when God shall call the world to judgment; when many from the dark corners of the earth shall rise up against you; when the men of Sodom shall be witnesses against this generation; when the men of Nineveh, and the men of Africa, and the men of every distant land, shall stand up in judgment to testify against sinners who have heard the gospel all their lives, who have despised the riches of God's goodness, who have rejected his grace, who have spurned the message that kings and princes longed to hear, who have trodden under foot the Son of God, and have counted the blood wherewith they were redeemed an unholy thing? O my friends, will you go from this land of light and truth, from this land of an open Bible and a preached gospel; will you go from great London, with all its wondrous Christian activities, down to the judgment hour, unsaved, unblessed, ungathered; rejecting Christ, and being doomed to perish at last? God help you to turn and live while it is today. I pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God; turn to him while you may, and seek his face and live.