

ARTICLE VII.

THE CERTAINTY OF THE WORLD'S CONVERSION.

BY REV. J. L. WILSON,

Missionary at the Gaboon, W. Africa.

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” This stern declaration wrung from the disciples of Christ the earnest inquiry, “Who then can be saved?” To this the Saviour replies, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

In this reply, there is no abatement of the real difficulties of being saved. The impressions of the disciples, on this particular point, were correct, and no effort is made to change or remove them. The kingdom of heaven, if taken at all, must be taken by violence, and none but the violent shall ever enter. It has a straight gate and a narrow way; and it is only those who enter the one and walk in the other that shall ever attain to everlasting life. The immutable terms of discipleship are, that we must take up our crosses and follow Christ, through evil as well as good report. Those who shine in the upper courts with most lustre, are those who have come out of great tribulation and made their garments white in the blood of the Lamb.

The impressions of the disciples, therefore, are rather confirmed than removed. According to their previous views, and those of the young man with whom the Saviour had just been conversing, it was not possible to be saved. Both were indulging fundamental errors on the most important of all subjects, and it was essential to their salvation that those errors should be corrected.

But whilst the foundation upon which they were standing is thus torn away, they are not given over to despair. A surer and better way is pointed out. That which they could never attain by their own exertions or morality, can easily be effected by the grace of God. In other words, what is impossible with men is possible with God. What we can never effect by our own unaided efforts, may easily be achieved by throwing ourselves upon the almighty power of Jehovah.

This doctrine accords with the experience of Christians in all ages of the world. There is no lesson more thoroughly taught in the school of Christ than this. Christians who have had even but little experience, are fully aware that they can make no advances in holiness, except so far as they are aided from on high. A clear view of the number and power of their spiritual enemies, if not attended by equally clear views of the all sufficiency of divine grace, never fails to awaken apprehensions about their final salvation; whilst a lively appreciation of the promises and assurances of the Bible, and right apprehensions of the power of God, as seldom fail to inspire them with courage and resolution.

Nor is this principle of dependence upon God, more important or indispensable in our personal conflicts with sin, than it is in every enterprise in which we engage for the benefit of others. "Without me," says the Saviour, "ye can do nothing." But then again it is said with equal emphasis, "I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth me."

Guided by this principle of dependence, there is no enterprise, however great or difficult, provided it is in accordance with the Divine will, upon which we may not enter with confident assurance of success. It matters not what human probabilities may be arrayed against it,—it matters not what disproportion there may be between the means and the end to be effected,—it matters equally little whether we are able or not to trace all the intermediate steps by which it is to be brought about,—nor are we to be discouraged or intimidated because unforeseen difficulties rise and threaten to frustrate our work. It is enough for us to know that we are engaged in a cause that has been authorised by God, and that we pursue it in a manner that he approves. Having settled these fundamental principles, we may press forward in any good work, with confidence that our labour shall not be in vain in the Lord.

These general remarks have been made for the purpose of introducing our general subject, *the certainty of the world's conversion*.

There are multitudes in the Christian church, at the present moment, who are pressed with difficulties in relation

to this matter, not unlike those which the disciples once felt in relation to the salvation of their own soul. And who is there among us, Christian hearers, who does not in some measure, at least, participate in feeling these difficulties.

No doubts are entertained in relation to what the Bible teaches on this subject. The mass of Christians believe, or profess to believe, that "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God." But the *overwhelming magnitude* of the work fills the mind with doubts and skepticism, and leads many to abandon the missionary cause, as a visionary and hopeless work.

Nor can it be denied that there are difficulties of the most formidable character in the way of evangelizing the world. When we remember the despotic power which the Greek and Roman churches wield over the great mass of European mind, even though those systems themselves are occasionally shaken to their very foundations; the fierce and intolerant spirit of Mahomedanism, in Western Asia and Eastern Africa; the iron grasp of Bramanism, in Central and Southern Asia. When we have remembered the millions of India, China, Africa, and the isles of the seas, immured in the deepest debasement; the prostrated condition of their moral and intellectual faculties; their steadfast adherence to the superstitious customs of their forefathers; their open and undisguised repugnance to the spirit and requirements of the gospel, wherever it has been preached among them; the insalubrious regions in which the great mass of these people live, and the difficulty of reaching them through the agency of white men, from whom alone they can reasonably expect to receive the gospel; the number of missionaries who have already fallen on these fields, or been compelled to retire, from impaired health or broken constitutions; the great number of languages that must be acquired and reduced to writing, before the minds of these multitudes can be reached and influenced; the supposed inadequate resources of the church, to furnish the men and the funds necessary to carry the gospel to every part of the world; the small and as yet but partial impression that has been made upon the heathen world by missionary labour; the great difficulty of procuring labourers, qualified in all respects for the arduous and varied duties

of missionary enterprise, we almost cease to wonder that the minds of the feeble have been seized with doubts and skepticism. Whoever looks at these difficulties, apart from the power of Almighty God, can scarcely fail to have their confidence shaken.

Pressed with the intrinsic difficulties of the work, and at the same time overlooking the power and agency of God, by which alone they can be surmounted, men have devised a variety of theories to exonerate themselves from their obligations to send the gospel to the heathen, and at the same time maintain an air of honesty and consistency. We will bestow a passing notice upon two of these theories.

One of these has its origin in the overweening regard which is felt for the superior excellence of the white race, and especially for the Anglo-Saxon branch, which it is supposed will supplant every other race, and ultimately become the sole occupants of our globe. And the inference which naturally flows from this high estimate of ourselves, is that those races which are to be supplanted are scarcely worth cultivating.

But it may be asked, in this connexion, what is it that has imparted so much energy and superiority to the Anglo-Saxon race? Has it not been the power and influence of Christianity? And why may we not expect equally as much, when her influence is exerted upon other races? She found our forefathers immured in the deepest debasement of heathenism. Her power was put forth, and they have been exalted to the first place among the families of the earth. Christianity has lost none of her native energy, What she has done in past ages, she can do now. What she has done for our race, she can do for every other on the face of the earth.

Besides it will be a perilous crisis in our own history, when we virtually adopt that theory which aims to root out other races, to make room for the expansion of our own. Christianity was not bestowed upon our world for the purpose of exalting one portion of the human family at the expense of the other. No people, however great or prosperous, can continue so long, who practically disregard those great laws of Christian charity which were intended to bind the whole human family in one common brother-

hood: and a career of reckless disregard for the rights and interests of others, can scarcely fail to result in the overthrow of our own.

The other theory, to which allusion has been made, couples itself with a favorite theological opinion; and if it is not itself the origin of that opinion, it at least derives its main strength from it. We allude to the views of those who believe that the second advent and personal reign of Christ on earth is nigh at hand. According to this theory, the conversion of the world, if it takes place at all, must be done by miracle, and that in a comparatively brief period. But as there is no indication of this, for the present at least, the difficulty is surmounted by supposing that the gospel is to be preached to the distant nations, as a *witness*; by which it is supposed a few will be gathered out and saved, whilst the great mass of the heathen are to be converted by miracle, or to be cut off and consigned to everlasting ruin. Hence, it is not uncommon for such to number themselves among the friends of missions; and they make haste to preach the gospel abroad, not so much, however, with ardent desires and persevering efforts to benefit and save the heathen, as to prepare the way for the fulfilment of their own expectations in the personal reign of Christ on earth.

We leave this theory with the single remark, that is not only unauthorized by the word of God, but is directly at variance with the ascending command of our blessed Saviour, "go ye into all the world and *preach* the Gospel to every creature."

There is no real occasion to resort to any of these subterfuges. A lively faith *sees* no insuperable obstacles in the way of the conversion of the whole world. If it depended wholly or mainly upon the unaided efforts of men, it would be a hopeless undertaking. But when we take into the account the omnipotent energies of Divine grace, the question assumes a new and entirely different aspect. Here is an element of power adequate in all respects to the magnitude of the work.

With, men the conversion of the world would be an impossibility, but with God all things, even the conversion and salvation of the whole world, are possible. Heathen na-

tions must forever remain what they are, or sink down even into deeper pollution, without an influence from on high; but let this be shed down upon them in God's own good time, and the world will speedily be filled with the light and glory of the Gospel.

In pursuing this subject further, we will endeavour to show—1st. That there is nothing *unreasonable* or *improbable* in the expectation that the world will be converted to God. 2d. The *means* or *instrumentality* by which it is to be effected: and 3d. What we, as individuals, may do to hasten its accomplishment.

In showing the *reasonableness* and *probability* of the conversion of the whole world, we will draw our arguments from three sources. 1st. The word of God. 2d. The analogies of nature and Providence: and 3d. The history of modern missions.

And in relation to the *first*, viz: the testimony of the word of God, we shall do little else than adduce a few passages of scripture, and allow them to speak for themselves. If the conversion of the world is not the subject of prophecy, both of the Old and New Testament, it will be difficult to say what is. What other interpretation can be given to such passages as the following? As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." "As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord." "All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." "For the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." "Ask of me and I will give the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." "He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the rivers to the ends of the earth." "Yea, all kings shall fall down before him, and all nations shall serve him." "And there were great voices in Heaven, saying the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

Our next argument is drawn from *the analogies of nature and Providence*.

The difficulty which skeptical minds feel in relation to the conversion of the world. arises from the great disparity

between the magnitude of the work, and the apparently insufficient means by which it is to be effected. And yet this very fact, instead of militating against our general position, when rightly viewed, furnishes a strong presumptive argument in its favour. This principle of contrast, is not only strikingly exemplified in ordinary operations of the laws of nature, but equally so in that superintending providence, which God is constantly exercising over the moral world.

What a disparity, for example, between a grain of mustard seed, that smallest of all seeds, and that luxuriant stock, which shooteth out great branches, so that the fowls of the air lodge under its shadow! Between the huge oak of the forest with its outstretched giant arms, and the little acorn which once embraced its embryo existence! Or those terrific flames that are sweeping away the noblest city in the world, and the little spark from which they took their origin! These are all striking missionary emblems, and show what immense results may flow from apparently inadequate causes.

We have still more striking illustrations of this principle, in the moral government of the world. Scarcely any great event has been brought to pass in the moral world, except by means that were apparently inadequate to the result; and in most cases, not only contrary to all human calculation, but in many instances, despite of the most vigorous efforts on the part of men to defeat them. The history of Joseph is an illustration in point. Who, following the footsteps of that disconsolate youth, as he journeyed over the sand plains and rugged rocks of Arabia, or when he was an obscure prisoner in an Egyptian dungeon, could have foreseen that he was destined to stand at the head of the most powerful kingdom in the world, and was to be the dispenser of bread and life, not only to a whole nation, but even to those unnatural brothers, who had sold him into bondage? Who could have predicted that Gideon, with his three hundred chosen men, could have routed the hosts of Midian, or that Jonathan and his armour bearer, as they silently clambered up the steep sides of the mountain, would put to flight the whole camp of the Philistines.

These were results that were greatly disproportioned to the means by which they were brought about.

The murderous Jews, as they stood around the cross of Christ, and witnessed his tragical death, flattered themselves that they had frustrated all his designs of mercy, when in reality they had only contributed to their fulfilment; and the results of that solemn scene, are such as no human sagacity could have predicted. Nor was the first establishment of Christianity in the various parts of the world less wonderful.

What human calculation could have foreseen that a few illiterate fishermen were to be made the instruments of revolutionizing the most powerful kingdoms in the world, and establish a religion, that would survive the wreck of empires, and work its way in the world with increasing power and influence to the end of time?

How remarkable is the history of the great reformation of the fifteenth century? How obscure and how apparently insignificant its origin! Against what fearful odds had the cause of truth to struggle. How often was it, to human appearances, on the verge of ruin, but as the result proved, when most endangered in appearance, most secure in reality. None but those who could overlook the narrow and changing scenes of this world, and behold coming events by the eye of faith, could have foreseen the glorious end to which these struggles were tending.

If it were necessary to multiply proofs in illustration of this principle, what an emphatic comment we derive from the recent affairs of Europe. How sudden, how unexpected, how contrary to all human calculation, have been the changes that have taken place in the political affairs of that continent! And who does not see the providence of God in all this? Who can confidently predict what will be the end of the varied struggle there? What have the nations, even the most powerful, of Europe, proven themselves in the hands of God, but as "a drop of the bucket," and "as the small dust of the balance." Is He not overturning and overturning these, to prepare the way for him whose right it is to reign? And why may we not expect changes in the heathen world, in God's own good time, as sudden, as unexpected and as powerful as those that are transpiring in Europe at the present moment?

But we call your attention, in the third place, to the his-

tory of modern missions, for evidence that the conversion of the world is no visionary expectation.

It cannot be denied that a feeling of impatience is beginning to manifest itself in many parts of the Christian Church, at what is regarded as the slow progress of the missionary work.

Many do not pretend to conceal their convictions that the success of missionary labour, so far as the conversion of souls is concerned, has not been proportioned to the outlay of means and labour, and draw the somewhat natural inference, that the heathen world, at this rate, will scarcely ever be evangelized.

In relation to such, there should be no hesitation in saying, that they have either entered upon a work, the cost of which has not been counted, or they are sadly ignorant of the actual results that have been achieved by missionary labour.

There is no want of statistical information to show, that the Gospel has not only been as readily received in heathen as in Christian lands, but in proportion to the outlay of means, in many missions at least, it has been vastly more successful. Take, for example, the missions to the Sandwich and Society Islands, to Sierra Leone and the Cape of Good Hope, to certain parts of central and northern India, and compare the number of converts in these, with those of the most favoured parts of our own Zion, and the preponderance of success, in proportion to the efforts that have been made, will be decidedly in favour of the former.

And the contrast will appear still greater, if we take into consideration, the great difference in the moral and social condition of the two. As yet the missionary work is in its incipient stages. When your missionaries first went among the heathen tribes, to whom they have since preached the everlasting Gospel, they found them not only absolutely ignorant of Christianity as such, but wedded to systems of idolatry, whose entire spirit was in open hostility to it.

On the side of these systems of idolatry, were enlisted the influence of habit, the force of public opinion, the power of superstition, the example of their fore-fathers, and more than all, perhaps, the open license which these systems gave to all sorts of vice and immorality.

On the side of Christianity there was not, humanly speaking, a single advantage. Against it were arrayed, the charge of novelty, its uncompromising denunciation of their vices, its open and undisguised hostility to all forms of false religion, and the fact likewise that it held forth no proffers of temporal good, with which heathen minds are always more readily influenced, than by any prospects of remote advantage, however great or inviting.

It should be remarked, further, that much of the time of your missionaries, heretofore, has unavoidably been spent in doing what may be regarded as *preparatory work*; such for example, as studying out and reducing to system the languages of heathen tribes; in translating the word of God into those languages, and in training up a native ministry who can be relied upon hereafter to preach the Gospel more extensively and effectively, than the missionaries themselves.

But, notwithstanding all these drafts upon the time and strength of your missionaries, and all these odds and disadvantages against which Christianity has had to contend, the Gospel has been faithfully preached, and thousands of souls have been converted to the Lord Jesus. And there is another very encouraging thought in connexion with this subject: The work of conversion, as a general thing, is progressing somewhat in proportion to the length of time that has been spent in cultivating these different fields of labor. It is a well known fact that in the older missions established by the American Churches, the number of conversions during the last ten years have greatly exceeded those of the previous twenty. And when we remember the constantly increasing forces at work in the heathen world—the multiplied translations of the Bible—the influence of Christian education upon the heathen youths around our stations—the awakened consciences of the multitudes who have already heard the Gospel—the influence of a native ministry—the impression that is constantly being made upon the heathen mind by the public administration of the ordinances of the Church—the gradual yielding of the power of superstition—we are amply authorized to believe that the work of conversion will be greatly accelerated in all future times. Indeed, we have, in the past history of missions, as limited as has been our experience, such success as to leave no room to doubt either the possibility or

probability of the world's conversion. A much stronger impression has already been made upon the heathen world than could reasonably have been expected; and God is beginning, even at this early period of the missionary enterprise, to bring about such results as no human sagacity could have foreseen, which no ordinary faith could have realized, and such as to leave no reasonable ground to doubt the ultimate evangelization of the whole world.

The progress of the various schemes of benevolence in the Christian world, has been such as to show us that there are ample resources in the church, to carry out this great work, and this in a comparatively short time. Take a single fact in illustration of this point:

In 1804, it is said, there were about 4,000,000 of Bibles in circulation in the world. At the present time, after the lapse of 44 years, it is supposed that there are about 30,000,000 in circulation, or more than seven times as many as there were in 1804. If our progress in translating, printing, and circulating the Scriptures, the next 44 years, be at the same ratio of progress, we shall have in circulation more than 200,000,000, which will be equal to a Bible for every family in the world.

Now, if, the progress of improvement in other departments of benevolence be equal to this, and there is no good reason to question it; if, for example, the missionary corps be augmented at the same rate; our stations, our schools, our churches, our pupils, be increased at the same ratio, what is there unreasonable or visionary in the expectation that the Gospel may be preached in the hearing of every human being on the face of the earth, even before the expiration of the present century?

But these varied instrumentalities, no matter how well they may be multiplied, can never, of themselves, effect any material change in the actual condition of the world. The Bible may be translated into every dialect in the world; the missionary corps may be augmented a hundred fold; schools may be established, and churches reared in every village and neighborhood in the habitable world; and, after all, no material improvement be made in the moral or religious condition of the Pagan world.

By what *means*, then, may we expect the heathen world to be renovated?

It will not be accomplished by any *miraculous interposition*, unless we regard the ordinary operations of the Spirit in the conversion of souls as such.

It will not be attained by a *ministry of angels*. God has committed the work to human hands; and it is by their agency alone, feeble and imperfect as it is, that he will accomplish his purposes of mercy to our fallen race.

It will not be brought about by leaving the heathen to themselves. Of the downward tendency of heathenism, the past history of the world affords ample evidence. The heathen nations of the earth have sunk down too deep in the mire of sin and pollution, ever to rise even to outward prosperity in the world, by their own unaided efforts; much more impotent must they be to rise to spiritual purity. The Apostle saw the difficulty of this, when he said of the Gentiles, "how shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed, and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?"

Subordinate instrumentalities, of a varied character, will no doubt be extensively employed in bringing about this great work. The discoveries in science—the improvements in the study of political economy and civil government—the advancement in moral and intellectual philosophy—the rapidly extending influence of commerce—the increased facilities of travel and transportation, by which the remote parts of the earth are brought in close contact—as well as other improvements and discoveries yet to be made, will all, under the controlling Providence of God, be made subservient to the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom and the salvation of the world.

In relation to the discoveries of modern science, the political economist sees in them the seeds of national wealth; the politician sees in them the elements of national power; the merchant expects them to extend his business and increase his wealth; the agriculturist expects them to fertilize his lands and fill his barns with their richest products; the man of science looks upon them with conscious pride, and regards them only as tokens of greater and more wonderful discoveries yet to be made; but the *Christian* regards them as so many agencies called into being by the Providence of God, to hasten the conversion and salvation of the world.

But the great and efficient means by which this event will be brought about, will be the mighty outpouring of the Spirit upon the Church, and, in connexion with this, upon the whole world.

The fact of the world's conversion is not itself more clearly a subject of prophecy, than it is that it will be accomplished by the outpouring of the Spirit. This promise was fulfilled in part on the day of Pentecost; and so it has been in every instance since, where there has been any ingathering of souls into the fold of Christ. This is all that is necessary now to secure the speedy regeneration of the heathen world.

We have already in the Christian Church the men and the money, and every thing else that is necessary to carry the Gospel to the remotest end of the earth, and it only remains that the Spirit be poured out upon us to stimulate our zeal, and prompt us to the needed effort. The primitive church, with scarcely the hundredth part of our resources, published the Gospel in almost every part of the then inhabited world.

What might we not do if we had their spirit? Their's was the true spirit of missions, and this is what we want—a spirit of love, of self-denial, and of unreserved consecration to the service of Christ; and this spirit is not less necessary to the missionaries you send abroad, than it is to the churches here. We all need to rise to a higher sense of responsibility. Your missionaries must be men of courage; of faith, of self-denial, and of perseverance, even unto death, if need be; whilst Christians here must take a more comprehensive view of duty than to suppose that their obligations to the heathen are summed up in contributing a portion of their substance to the cause of missions, and in uniting in an occasional prayer for the conversion of the world.

We must rise to those high and clear views of duty, that shall make us regard our property, our talents, our time, and every thing else we have, committed to the great work of regenerating and saving a lost world. And why should we not? It was for this that the Saviour laid down his life. For the, same end, the Spirit was promised. For this purpose the church was organized. The providence of God has brought the most distant; and formerly the most

inaccessible parts of the earth, within our reach. The heathen, every where, are waiting to receive the gospel; and is there any enterprise, in the whole range of human affairs, of more real grandeur, or which promises more glorious results, than this?

But let us inquire, in the last place, more specifically, *what we may do for the advancement of this work.*

The fact that we have organized missionary societies and boards, is evidence that we are alive, to some extent at least, to the responsibilities of this momentous duty. On this point we can only bid our brethren God speed, and leave it, as our parting injunction, that they do so much now that they leave no room for unavailing regrets when they come to stand with the assembled universe, before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. Think of the value of souls, as they will appear in the light of that great day. Think of your money, in connexion with these priceless souls, and act now as you will then wish you had.

But our prayers and our hearty sympathies, in the missionary work, are as much needed as our contributions. It must be in answer to prayer, that the spirit will be poured out upon the heathen world; and so deep are our convictions of the indispensable importance of earnest prayer for the success of the gospel, that we seriously doubt whether contributions, however generous or prompt, would do any good without it; and we speak from experience when we say that, if brethren would cheer the hearts and strengthen the hands of their missionaries, as they toil in foreign lands, let them see that they feel a lively, sympathetic interest in the work in which they are engaged.

But there is a third duty which we would not fail to mention, especially as it is less frequently urged than those to which allusion has just been made.

We take it for granted that some of those we are now addressing are mothers; and the duty which we wish to enjoin, is, that you train up your children with reference to the missionary work. We would not have you take them out of the hands of God, and shape their future course according to your convictions of their duty. This is the prerogative of Jehovah, which even a parent may not usurp. All that we propose is, that you endeavour to interest your children in this great cause; let them understand that a

command has been laid upon the church, to preach the gospel to every creature on the face of the earth; inspire them with enlarged views of duty; so that when they come to decide the question, to what great object they will devote their lives, they may decide it intelligently and with hearts overflowing with love and compassion for a perishing world.

We have spoken of the certainty that the world will be converted; we have spoken of the decided impression that has already been made upon the heathen world; but we would not remove the impression generally entertained, that the work yet to be done is one of immense and almost overwhelming magnitude. We do not speak of our success as proof that any considerable progress has already been made towards the accomplishment of this great work, but as evidence of what *may be* done when the energies of the church are properly enlisted. Our efforts must be increased a hundred fold, before we can expect any grand or glorious results. But where shall we find the men to carry forward this enterprise, if the rising generation does not possess more of the missionary spirit than we do?

We do not suppose that parents can reconcile themselves to the idea of giving up their children to the missionary work, without a struggle. It would be but natural for them to wish to see them settled around them, occupying stations of usefulness and distinction in their native land, and enjoying comforts which the industry of parents has heaped up for them. But of how little importance will it appear to you and to them on a bed of death, whether they have lived here or in a foreign land, provided they have been walking in the path of duty! How indescribably insignificant and contemptible must appear all the comforts and luxuries that you may lavish upon them now, provided they shall not have devoted all their energies to that one great object of advancing the Redeemer's kingdom on earth.

Let us all engage in this work more heartily than we have ever done. It is not a hopeless cause in which we have enlisted. We shall not contend, as those who beat the air. It is as sure of success, as it is that Jehovah is enthroned in glory; and it is one upon which we shall look back with joy and gratitude, when all the honours, and the wealth, and the pleasures of this world, shall be forgotten!