

The Word of Men and the Word of God

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"For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." 1 Thess. 2:13

If we examine the features of the New Testament churches as reflected in the inspired page, and seek to gather from that mode of internal evidence the spiritual condition of each, we shall find that though in Christ Jesus all were one, yet in grace and gift, in state and standing, in knowledge and experience, in walk and conduct they widely differed from one another. Thus the church at Rome seems to have been distinguished above her sister churches for the strength of her faith. "I thank my God," says the apostle, "through Jesus Christ for you all that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world." (Rom. 1:8.) So conspicuous and eminent was the faith of the Roman believers that they had become an object of universal mention and thankfulness among the churches. And this seems to be one reason why the apostle in his Epistle to the Romans dwells so fully and largely upon justification, they being able above other churches to enter experimentally into the glorious doctrine of justification by faith in the righteousness of the Son of God. Thus the whole church to the end of time profits by the strength of their faith; for had they been weak in faith they could not have received an epistle so fully declaring the way whereby a sinner stands justified before God by the imputation of the obedience of Christ without the works of the law. The Corinthian church was particularly favoured with the gifts of

utterance and knowledge, as the apostle declares: "I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; that in everything ye are enriched by him in all utterance, and in all knowledge; even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you; so that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1:4-7.) These gifts indeed had their attendant perils, for we find the apostle warning them against being puffed up thereby, and assuring them that they might speak with the tongues of men and of angels, have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and yet be nothing. (1 Cor. 8:1; 13:2.) The Galatian churches had unhappily become "removed from him that called them into the grace of Christ unto another gospel," which the apostle declares was really "not another," as not being worthy of the name of gospel, but was a perversion of the gospel of Christ. (Gal. 1:6, 7.) They had thus strayed from the green pastures and still waters of gospel grace, and got upon the barren heath of legal service; had left the warm sunshine of Mount Zion, and become entangled in the smoke of Mount Sinai. The church at Philippi was suffering under persecution, for to it we read "was given in the behalf of Christ not only to believe on him but also to suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29); and yet it continued firm in "the fellowship of the gospel from the first day until now." (Phil. 1:5.) There was also in it a great spirit of love and liberality; for no church communicated with Paul as concerning giving and receiving but it only. (Phil. 4:15.) The wealthy Corinthians allowed him to preach to them the gospel of God freely, suffering the poorer church at Philippi to supply that which was lacking to him (2 Cor. 11:7-9); proving, as is often the case, the greater willingness of the poor than of the rich to give to the cause and servants of God. The churches of Ephesus and of Colosse seem to have been further advanced in knowledge, and more fully and

firmly established in the truth than most of the other New Testament churches, the former especially having had the benefit of Paul's personal ministry for three years. They were therefore better qualified to receive those deep epistles which were severally addressed to them, in which the grandest and most glorious mysteries of our most holy faith are unfolded with a wisdom and a power which seem to leave us ever learners and never able to grasp them fully to our satisfaction. The church at Thessalonica, to which we now come, was inferior to that at Rome in faith, to that of Corinth in gifts, to that at Ephesus in knowledge, and yet was one of the most favoured in the New Testament. The two epistles which Paul sent them were the first which ever issued from his pen, and were written to them in the early days of their profession, about a year after the gospel had "come to them not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance." They had been much persecuted for righteousness' sake, and had "received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost." (1 Thess. 1:5, 6.) There was also one feature in their Christian character which shone forth with distinguished lustre—*brotherly love*—according to the apostle's own testimony: "But as touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another." (1 Thess. 4:9.) Blessed mark of heavenly grace! The apostle also seems to have been peculiarly attached to them, for he says, "So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us." (1 Thess. 2:8.) The reason of his great love to them appears to have been, first, the power which he felt in his own soul in preaching to them the word of life, for he calls to their mind, "Ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake;" and, secondly, the way in which they received the word from his lips, which made him say, "For 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? For ye are our glory and joy." (1 Thess. 2:19, 20.) When we look at the character of this eminent apostle of the Gentiles, as drawn as if unconsciously by his own pen, what a pattern, what an example he sets for Christian ministers! How his whole soul was in the work! What ardent love to the souls of men, what singleness of eye to the glory of God! How delighted he was to find power attending the gospel he preached, and a harvest of living souls falling beneath the sickle of the word as he thrust it into the crop! We may perhaps say that four things gladdened Paul's heart in finding the power of God resting so abundantly upon his word: 1, the glory of God, which was above all things dear to his soul; 2, the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ in his Person and work; 3, the rich harvest of souls gathered by his instrumentality; and, 4, the seals and evidences afforded thereby of his being a servant of God, an apostle of Jesus Christ. O that the Lord would raise up men after his own heart upon whom some measure of the spirit that we see in Paul might rest; men blessed with his simplicity and godly sincerity, favoured with his singleness of eye to the glory of God and the exaltation of the Lord Jesus, and whose speech and preaching, like his, might be "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Then indeed we should see that the faith of those who received their testimony would stand not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:4, 5.)

But let us now, with God's help and blessing, approach our text, in which I think we may see these four leading features:—

I.—*First, "the word of men" as contrasted with "the word of God."*

II.—*Secondly*, that there is a *receiving of the gospel* as the word of men, and a receiving of the gospel as the word of God.

III.—*Thirdly*, the *evidence and proof* of the reception of the gospel as the word of God: its effectually working in them that believe.

IV.—*Fourthly*, that it is a matter for *unceasing* thanks and praise; "for this cause also thank we God without ceasing."

I.—As far as the apostle was a man, speaking with human lips and using ordinary human language, his word was necessarily the "word of men." Indeed, it could not possibly be otherwise. God does not speak to his people with a voice from heaven, does not use the instrumentality of angels to reveal his mind and will to the sons of men. He speaks to man by men of like passions with their fellow men, and in a language which they mutually understand. Otherwise it would be as Paul says, "There are, it may be, so many kind of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me." (1 Cor. 14:10, 11.) In that sense, therefore, the word that the servants of God speak is "the word of men;" and yet in another sense it is "the word of God," clearly establishing a vital, essential distinction between them.

i. Let us seek then to enter a little more closely and fully into the distinction between the word of men and the word of God, as intended by the apostle, for upon that point the force of the text mainly turns.

1. By "the word of men" we may first, then, understand that general mode of communication between man and man, by which every transaction of human life is carried on. I need not explain that everything in the way of communication between man and his fellow is carried on by words; for if writing is used, it is only words in another form. The use of language to communicate thought is one of the grand distinctions between man and the brute creation, and without its continual use and exercise the whole frame of society would fall to pieces like a ship cast by a storm upon the rocks. This, then, is the province of the word of men, to communicate to each other their mutual thoughts, and to link society together by a participation of mutual interests. As long, therefore, as the word of men is engaged in its regular province, it is what God meant it to be; what he who devised language and gave us power of thus uttering and making known to others our thoughts, wants, plans, and intentions, and of understandings those of our fellow men, designed it to accomplish. The apostle is not disparaging or discarding the word of men and thus engaged in its natural province of communication between man and man, or even its higher employment when used as the instrument of preaching the gospel. As long then and as far as these words of men are words of truth and uprightness, words of integrity, sincerity, and honesty, they fulfil a purpose without which the world itself could not stand or society be carried on.

But when we approach the domain of heavenly things; when we leave earth, with everything earthly, and come to heaven and things heavenly, there the word of men necessarily fails. Words are but the expression of thought or the communication of knowledge. But what can man, as man, think or know of the deep mysteries of God? Are they not completely out of his sight and out of his reach? "It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? Deeper than hell; what canst

thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth and broader than the sea." (Job 11:8, 9.) As, then, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways not our ways, what can we know of them but by a divine revelation? Thus everything concerning God, and especially his existence in a trinity of Persons and Unity of Essence; everything connected with the co-equality and co-eternity of his dear Son; everything connected with his acceptable worship, or how a sinner can be saved; everything connected with a future state of happiness and misery; in a word, every doctrine we find in the Scriptures is beyond all the comprehension and conception of man's heart by nature. And as it is beyond his conception, it must be beyond his expression. We see, therefore, from this, that there is a need of something beyond the word of men to communicate to us a knowledge of that which concern our eternal and immortal interests. The word of men, then, is good as far as it is connected with the things of men; but there is a necessity for something beyond the word of men, if we are to know anything of those heavenly truths and divine realities which are not only for time but for eternity.

2. Here, then, comes in the necessity and the nature of the word of God; for though God uses in it human words, yet he communicates by them what none could have known but by divine revelation. Besides, then, the use of "the word of men" as the instrument of ordinary speech, there is a higher sense in which "the word of men" is made a means of communicating the word of God. The knowledge, the thoughts, the inspiration are divine; but the words in which they are expressed, though dictated by God, are as human language and so far only the words of men.

Now the apostle was sent to preach the word of God. To do this was the end and object of his life; and that what he

preached as the word of God should be received as the word of God, was the joy and delight of his soul. But how came he to know it was the work of God? What evidence had he in his bosom that the gospel he preached was not the word of men; that there was something in it supernatural and divine; and that in a way so pre-eminent that it was as much the word of God from his lips, as if God himself spake it. To see this, let us look at the apostle's call when the Lord himself appeared to him at Damascus' gate, and hear what was the commission which the very Jesus whom he was persecuting there and then gave him:—"But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee." (Acts 26:16.) This commission was renewed three days after, when Ananias came with a message from the Lord. "The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard." (Acts 22:14, 15.) Here, then, we have Paul's own clear, indubitable testimony that there was something spoken to him by God; that there was something supernatural and divine which he had seen, which he had heard, which he had tasted, felt, and handled, and which he was to declare as a special revelation from God to him, not only for his own soul, but also for the souls of others. In an almost similar way he speaks in his epistle to the Galatians: "But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1:11, 12.) He therefore speaks in a similar way in the first Epistle to the Corinthians: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by

his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." And to show that the very words wherein he spake to them were given from above, he adds, "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Spirit teacheth: comparing spiritual things with spiritual." (1 Cor. 2:9, 10, 13.) Is it not evident from these testimonies that what Paul spake in the name of God, he spake as the very word of God? As God spake *to* him, so God spake *by* him, and what he uttered by his lips was in fact uttered by the Holy Ghost through him; that divine and heavenly Teacher making use of his tongue to express the things revealed to his soul. He therefore declares of his preaching that it was "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." (1 Cor. 2:4.)

Now without this inspiration which was thus given to the apostle and to the other writers of the Old and New Testament, we have no evidence or certainty that the Bible is the word of God, and as such contains a revelation of his mind and will. The whole matter lies in a very narrow compass. The Bible is either the word of God or not. If it is the "word of God," it is not the "word of men;" if it is the "word of men" it is not the "word of God." Surely those who received it as the word of God, must have known whether God did or did not speak unto them. And see what a conclusion we must come to if we deny this. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and all the prophets of the Old Testament, and the apostles of our Lord in the New, must either have received words into their heart directly and immediately from God, when they said "the word of the Lord came unto them," and that God spake unto them, or they must be the veriest impostors that ever lived. There can be no other conclusion but one of these two. They must either be what they profess, prophets and apostles, inspired of the Holy Ghost, and receiving their message direct from God, or they must be the

veriest deceivers, and the worst of impostors, in pretending that God spake unto them, when he never spoke to them at all. Thus, whatever men may say against inspiration generally, or against verbal and plenary inspiration in particular, we are brought to this point, that these men of God must either have been what they said they were, inspired of the Holy Ghost with a message from God, which they have delivered to us, or else must have been some of the basest impostors the world ever knew.

To this point then we are come, that the gospel which Paul preached was not the word of men, that is of natural, unenlightened, uninspired men, but the word of God. This you will say might have been true of the gospel which Paul preached when he preached it. But Paul is dead; and what evidence have we that we have Paul's gospel now? Our evidence is, that the same Paul wrote the Epistles who preached the gospel; so that what he once spake by his tongue, he now speaks by his pen. He therefore says to the Corinthians, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord." (1 Cor. 14:37.) He also says to the Romans, "I long to see you that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift." (Rom. 1:11.) Now that spiritual gift which he would impart to them by his mouth, he imparts to us by his hand. We have therefore the same gospel, the same word of God in his writings which the Thessalonians had in his words.

II.—But I pass on to consider our next point, in which I proposed to show what it is to *receive the gospel* as the word of men, and what it is to receive the gospel as the word of God.

The apostle in our text evidently draws a very plain line

between these two things. "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth the word of God." From this we evidently gather that there is a receiving of the gospel as the word of men; for had they received this gospel only as the word of men, there would have been no cause for rejoicing in his heart.

i. Let us then look at this point, what it is to receive the gospel as *the word of men*; for you may receive the gospel as the word of men, without receiving it as the word of God. And this is the case with hundreds and thousands. They receive the gospel, they believe it to be true, and in very many cases make a profession of their faith, and yet do but receive it as the word of men. Thus we read of those who "for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away." (Luke 8:13.) So we find that "many believed in Christ" in the days of his flesh, who never believed in him to the saving of their soul, but were of their father the devil. (John 8:30, 44.) Truth has in it a commanding power. When Jesus spake, "the people were astonished at his doctrine, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." (Matt. 7:28, 29.) Even Simon Magus is said to have "believed," and was baptized upon that faith, continuing with Philip and wondering as he beheld the miracles and signs which were done. And yet he "had neither part nor lot in this matter;" for "his heart was not right in the sight of God;" and with all his faith, and all his baptism, he was still "in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity." (Acts 8:13, 21, 23.) Truth, as I said, has a commanding power; and now I will endeavour to show you the effect it has as such when received as "the word of men."

1. First, then, it is received into the *natural understanding*.

There is a light which attends the gospel. We read, therefore, that when the Lord went and dwelt in Capernaum, that "the people which sat in darkness saw great light, and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death, light sprung up" (Matt. 4:13, 16); and yet this very Capernaum which was "exalted unto heaven" by Christ dwelling there as the light of the world, was "to be brought down to hell." (Matt. 11:23.) There is also a beauty, a harmony, and a self-evincing evidence in the truth which often commends itself to men's minds; and under this influence many receive the word into their judgment, their intellect, their understanding, who never felt and never will feel the power of truth in their hearts, as attended with divine light, life, and efficacy to regenerate their soul.

2. Again, there is a receiving of the gospel as the word of men into the *natural conscience*; for there is a natural conscience as well as a spiritual conscience. This is very evident from the language of the apostle when speaking of the Gentiles: "Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or excusing one another." (Romans 2:15.) And do we not read of those in the case of the woman taken in adultery, who were "convicted by their own conscience, and went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even to the last." (John 8:9.) The apostle also speaks of "commending himself to every man's conscience, in the sight of God." (2 Cor. 4:2.) Now as he preached to thousands, he could not have done this unless there was a conscience in every man, as well as in every good man. Scarcely any thing seems to approach the work of grace so nearly as this; and yet we see in the cases of Saul, Ahab, and Herod, that there may be the deepest convictions of conscience and yet no saving conversion to God. Thus there is a receiving the gospel into the natural conscience,

producing moral convictions, and a work that seems at first sight to bear a striking similarity to the work of God upon the soul; and yet the whole may be a mere imitation of grace, a movement of nature floating upon the surface of the mind, and at times touching upon the domain of conscience, yet not springing out of the word of God as brought with a divine power into the heart.

3. But there is a going even beyond this. There is a receiving of the gospel as the word of men into the *affections*, that is, the *natural* affections. This seems indeed to be the nearest approach possible to a divine work; for "to receive the love of the truth" is given in Scripture as a mark of salvation. (2 Thess. 2:10.) And yet, there is a being "zealously affected, but not well." (Gal. 4:17.) There is a love to a minister, so that "if possible, there would be a plucking out of their own eyes, and giving them to him;" and yet an apostle may justly stand in doubt of such. (Gal. 4:15, 20.) So sweet may be the sound of the gospel, that a minister may be unto a people "as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice;" and yet they may "hear his words and not do them." (Ezekiel 33:32.) Does not the Lord speak of the stony ground hearers who "receive the word with joy" and yet "they have no root, which for a while believe and in time of temptation fall away?" (Luke 8:13.) Herod heard John gladly, and did many things: yet could command his head to be cut off at the word of a dancing girl. All these things show us that there is a receiving of the gospel into the natural affections, having a liking, even what we may almost call a love to it, and yet all be deception and delusion.

This then is receiving the gospel as "the word of men." Thousands never receive it in any other way, nor does it ever enter further, or penetrate deeper, than what I have described, or is it ever attended with saving power to them.

The similarity indeed is so great, and the correspondence so close between the two, that it is the hardest possible thing for a minister to draw the nice line of distinction between a child of God in his worst state and a hypocrite in his best, between the lowest work of grace and the highest work of nature. But there is a line, though it may be such as "no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen," which I shall now endeavour to draw, by describing what it is to receive the gospel, not as the word of men, but as "the word of God."

ii. God speaks in and by his word, the Bible, which we have in our hands, and I hope some of us in our hearts. When the apostles preached, theirs was then the word of God; for God spake *in* them as he now speaks to us *by* them. Bear then this in mind, that there is no other way whereby God speaks to the souls of men but by his written word. As this contains and unfolds the gospel of his grace, it is especially in and by this gospel that his voice is heard; for it is the same gospel which Paul preached, and of which he says in our text that it is the word of God. Now he tells the Thessalonians that this gospel "came not unto them in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance." (1 Thess. 1:5.) This is the same distinction which I have sought to draw. It comes to some in word only. They hear the word of the gospel, the sound of truth; but it reaches the outward ear only; or if it touch the inward feelings as I have described, it is merely as the word of men. But where God the Holy Ghost begins and carries on his divine and saving work, he attends the word with a peculiar, an indescribable, and yet an invincible power. It falls as from God upon the heart. He is heard to speak in it; and in it his glorious Majesty appears to open the eyes, unstop the ears, and convey a message from his own mouth to the soul. Thus it comes "not in word only but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much

assurance."

As then I have drawn the line of distinction between nature and grace, and endeavoured to show the way in which the gospel is received as "the word of men," I shall now take the counterpart, and attempt to point out how it is received as "the word of God." And you will observe that in almost every point there is a resemblance, and yet a distinctive difference.

1. First, then, under the teachings and operations of the blessed Spirit, it is received as the word of God into an *enlightened understanding*. That the understanding is spiritually enlightened is evident from Paul's prayer: "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened." (Eph. 1:17, 18.) A peculiar light attends the gospel as brought into the heart by the power of God. Of this light the apostle thus speaks: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6.) It is this peculiar shining of God into the heart which distinguishes this light from the mere enlightening of the natural understanding. Our blessed Lord therefore calls it "the light of life." "I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12.) It is also of this light that John speaks: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." (1 John 1:7.) It is by this light shining upon the Person of Christ that those who received him "beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father." To have this light is to be "filled with a knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;" and by this we are "delivered from the

power of darkness, and are translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son." (Col. 1:9, 13.) This is a very different thing from what is called "head knowledge;" for it is attended by regeneration, or "a putting on of the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." (Col. 3:10.) The apostle therefore says, "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord."

2. Again, under this divine power the gospel is received as the word of God *into the conscience*. God speaks in and by the word particularly to the conscience; and when he so speaks the soul falls under the power of the word, for the conscience is as it were its vital, tender part. Some hear the gospel as the word of men perhaps for years before God speaks in it with a divine power to their conscience. There has been sometimes a touching of the string of natural feeling. They thought they understood the gospel; they thought they felt it; they thought they loved it. But all this time they did not see any vital distinction between receiving it as the word of men and as the word of God. But in some unexpected moment, when little looking for it, the word of God was brought into their conscience with a power never experienced before; a light shone in and through it which they never saw before; a majesty, a glory, an authority, an evidence accompanied it which they never knew before; and under this light, life, and power they fell down with the word of God set home in their heart, as the apostle speaks in his Epistle to the Corinthians. (1 Cor. 14:25.) Here is the beginning of the work of grace, for this divine light and life produce spiritual convictions of sin, godly sorrow, working repentance to salvation not to be repented of; with a sense of the Majesty of Jehovah as the great Searcher of hearts and of our ruined, lost condition before him. For God speaks to the conscience; that is the special domain of the Holy Ghost; that is the special seed-bed of the word of God—the

soil in which it takes root, grows, and thrives.

3. But as I am now chiefly speaking not of the law but of the gospel as the power of God unto their salvation, I must pass on to a third point, whereby it is distinguished from the "word of men." Whenever the gospel is brought with a divine power and an unctuous evidence into the heart as the word of God, it is *received into the spiritual affections*. Thus as we have a natural understanding for the word of men and a spiritual understanding for the word of God, and as we have a natural conscience for the one and a spiritual conscience for the other, so we have natural affections to like the word and spiritual affections to love the word. "Set your affections," says the apostle, "on things above." We read of some who "received not the love of the truth that they might be saved;" clearly implying there is a receiving of the truth without receiving a love of the truth, and that whenever there is a receiving of the love of the truth, there is a salvation in it. When then Christ speaks in the gospel to the heart; when he reveals himself to the soul; when his word, dropping as the rain and distilling as the dew, is received in faith and love, and he is embraced as the chiefest among ten thousand and the altogether lovely, by the power of the gospel he takes his seat upon the affections and becomes enthroned in the heart as its Lord and God. This is receiving the word of God into the *affections*, as before it was received into the understanding by a divine light, and into the conscience by a penetrating power. And it is "*received*." Before it was rebelled against, shut out, repelled; or if received, it was but skin deep, floating upon the surface; a sort of passing light, or transient conviction, or momentary affection; nothing solid, nothing abiding, nothing vital, nothing really divine or spiritual; but a mere rising and falling, a heaving and sinking of natural feeling, which left the understanding really unenlightened, the conscience really

untouched, and the affections really unmoved, unrenewed, unchanged. Thus, though there is an imitation of the Spirit's work upon the soul, which seems as though it embraces these three things, light, life, and love; yet the levity, the superficiality, the emptiness stamped upon all who merely receive the gospel as the word of men is sufficient evidence it never sank deep into the heart, never took any powerful grasp upon their soul. It therefore never brought with it any real separation from the world; never gave strength to mortify the least sin; never communicated power to escape the least snare of Satan; was never attended with a Spirit of grace and supplications; never brought honesty, sincerity, and uprightness into the heart before God; never bestowed any spirituality of mind, or any loving affection toward the Lord of life and glory or to the people of God. It did its miserable possessors no more real good than any science, or art, or manufacture, which they might have learnt naturally. It was merely nature in another form, and was but the reception of truth in the same way as we receive mere scientific principles, or learn a language, a business, or a trade. But where it is received as the word of God, it takes such an effectual hold of a man's understanding, heart, conscience, and affections, that it never lets him go till it lands him safe in heaven. A man can never escape, nor ever wishes to escape out of the eternal arms, which are underneath him in the word of God, as made life and power to his soul. Nor does he ever get out of the gospel net, for it has encircled him with the bands of love, and will ever hold him fast. Nor does he wish to escape from the eye of God, or get away from the sound of the gospel, or leave that Lord who has made himself precious to his soul. His concern and anxiety rather are, that he knows so little, feels so little, and enjoys so little of the gospel of the grace of God, and it would delight his very soul if he had more light in his understanding, more tenderness in his conscience, more love

in his heart. He does not "say unto God, Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways" (Job 21:14); but on the contrary is ever desiring for the Lord to come nearer and nearer to him. Nor is he contented with the form of godliness while he denies the power; for he is ever sighing after the power, ever wants the teaching of the Spirit, ever struggles under a body of sin and death, longs for nothing so much as liberty, love, communion, spirituality, and enjoyment of divine things in his own bosom, to walk worthy of his vocation, live a life of faith and prayer, and thus manifest himself as one taught and blessed of God.

Thus though it is hard for a minister to describe the nice distinction between nature and grace and show how far a man may go and have no real religion, or how far a saint may sink and seem to have less than even a base hypocrite, yet there is a vital difference which distinguishes the precious from the vile, and that not only visible to the eye of the great Searcher of hearts, but obvious also to our more dim sight. We cannot but carry at times in our bosoms a clear evidence of the distinction between receiving the word of God as the word of God, and receiving it as the word of men. Even the gracious hearer sometimes listens to the gospel as the word of men. He knows that it is truth which is sounding in his ears, but no life or power, dew, savour, or divine influence attends it to his soul. He is not shaken as to the doctrines which he holds, and which he hears boldly, faithfully, and clearly preached; the experience described corresponds with what he has felt, tasted, and handled of the word of life; but there is something lacking, what I may well call the main thing; for if "the kingdom of God is not in word but in power," not to feel the power is to fall short of a vital apprehension and a living enjoyment of the kingdom of God in one's own soul. At these times then the word of God is to him but the word of men, for there is no voice in it beyond

the voice of the preacher. But there are times and seasons when the gospel is made the power of God unto salvation; when it comes not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance. And though he may be scarcely able to describe his feelings—for many well taught Christians are very unable to describe what they experimentally enjoy and know—yet he has an inward, indubitable evidence that God has spoken to him in the gospel, and brought a message of reconciliation, of pardon, of mercy, of peace, of salvation into his breast. The power that he has thus felt under the gospel is such as carries with it its own evidence. He cannot explain it to others, or understand its nature himself; but when he has once felt it, he can always afterwards recognise it, and is conscious of everything distinct from it, and that falls short of it. Thus though the children of God may be often exercised, how far they may go and prove wrong at last, still each carries in his own bosom more or less of inward evidence that he has at various times received the gospel, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth the word of God.

III.—I pass on to our next point, the proof and evidence of receiving the gospel, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God: *it effectually worketh in them that believe.*

Receiving the word as the word of men works, as I have shown, certain effects; but it does not *work effectually*. That word "effectually" stamps the difference between the two works with God's own stamp-mark. If what I have said be correct; if I have traced out with any degree of truth and clearness the work of nature and the work of grace, you will see that receiving the gospel as the word of men works in the understanding, in the conscience, and in the affections, that is, so far as they are natural; but it does not work

effectually so as to bring forth salvation. There is nothing really done thereby; no good is actually communicated, nothing wrought in or brought forth that will stand for eternity; in fact, even as regards visible effects, there is no effectual work where there is no grace. There is no effectual separation from the world; no effectual repentance; no effectual faith, hope, or love; no effectual prayer or supplication; no effectual cleaving to the Lord with purpose of heart. It is all shallow, all superficial, deceptive, and hypocritical. But where the gospel is received as the word of God, though it may be in a small measure, it is in an effectual measure. God's word, like God's work, must have a reality in it. When God said, "Let there be light," light burst forth at his creative fiat, and was effectual light: it existed at once as day. When God commanded the day-star to know its place, the sun to shine in the sky, or bade earth produce its living creatures, its grass, its fruits, and so on, God's word was effectual. "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast." (Psa. 33:6, 9.) But the word of man is not effectual. I might go forth on a night like this and say, "Wind change! rain fall!" but my words would be the words of an idiot. Let God only command the bottles of heaven, and they will drop their full store upon the earth after the long and trying drought. Let God only speak, and nature smiles or nature withers according to the word of his mouth. So it is in grace. When God speaks, he speaks effectually, and his word has an effectual operation. Thus, if he give conviction, it is effectual conviction, and never wears off till it ends in effectual consolation. If he bring the soul effectually under Mount Sinai, he will bring it effectually under Mount Zion; if he convince effectually of unbelief, he will give effectual faith; if he effectually kill, he will effectually make alive; and if he effectually bring down, he will effectually bring up. This is the

great distinguishing mark of receiving the gospel as the word of God: that it is thorough work. When God called Abraham, there was no delay: he went out into the land which he knew not. Compare the going out of Lot from Sodom with the going out of Lot's wife. Lot went out effectually. Lot's wife followed the steps of her husband; but she turned back; there was no effectual leaving of Sodom, and therefore she fell under the destruction of Sodom. We read of one who said, "I go, Sir," but he went not. There was no effectual going. The other said he would not, but afterwards repented and went. That was effectual going. So when Abraham was called on to offer Isaac, he rose up early in the morning and went unto the place which God had told him of. God worked effectually in him by his word, and by the power of that word in his heart he was enabled to offer up Isaac. Thus, even if you have but a small measure of grace, yet if you have received the gospel into your heart as the word of God, it has wrought in you effectually. It may not have been a very deep work, or of long standing; you may have much yet to learn both of yourself and of the Lord, of your misery and his mercy, of your weakness, and of his strength, of your sin to condemn and of his mercy to save. Your faith may be weak, your hope dim, and your love but scanty; and yet if they have been wrought in your heart by the power of God through his word and the gospel of his grace, they have been wrought in you effectually. There is a vast difference between a still-born child and a living babe. The living babe may not be so fine a child, judging from appearance, as the still-born. Many babes we know that live are born very weak and feeble, and some have even been laid aside to die who have revived through careful nursing, life being discovered in them, and grown up into strong men or women. So you must not measure the work of grace in your own soul or in that of others by its depth or strength, but by its vitality. Is there life in your bosom? Has power attended the work? Is the grace

of God really in your heart? Has God spoken to your soul? Have you heard his voice, felt its power, and fallen under its influence? It may perhaps at present not extend much beyond the conviction of sin, the confession of your transgressions and iniquities, covering you with confusion and shame of face before God, some attempt to call upon his holy name, and seek his face by prayer and supplication. At present you may have little effectual operation of his word upon your heart, except to make you in earnest about the salvation of your soul, separating you from the world, and bringing you as a humble hearer under the preached gospel. Your views of the Person and work of Christ, of his suitability to your wants and woes, of the compassion of his loving heart, of his heavenly blessedness may be but dim and feeble, and yet they may be so far spiritual and real, as to draw forth a measure of faith toward him and of hope in him. There may be all this weakness in your faith and hope, and yet there may be truth and vitality in them. I would not speak a word to encourage the presumption of a vain, confident professor, but I certainly would not put forth my hand to quench the smoking flax, or break the bruised reed. I would seek if this be the last time I speak in your ears, to encourage the faintest, feeblest work of grace, while I would equally endeavour to stamp out all sparks of false fire, that you may have kindled to warm your hands at. But though I thus speak, yet I know that it is the hardest part of the Christian ministry to draw this narrow line so as to strengthen the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees of real believers, and yet not strengthen the hands of self-deceived professors.

ii. I say "real believers;" for now look at the characters in whom, according to our text, the word of God effectually works, "*in them which believe.*" Faith is the eye whereby we see light in God's light; faith the ear whereby we hear the

word of God, and faith the hand whereby we receive out of Christ's fulness grace for grace. Thus the word of God worketh effectually in them that believe, and in them only; for where there is no faith there can be no effectual work; and I may add that it works effectually in exact measure and proportion to our faith. If our faith be weak, then the power that works in us is weak; or, to speak more correctly, if the power that works in us be weak, our faith, corresponding to that power, will be weak also. As we believe, it is done unto us. Strong faith brings strong consolation; weak faith brings weak consolation. We have all of us the same hand, the same number of fingers, the same way of using them; but the hand may be the hand of a babe or the hand of a strong man. The babe may grasp the same object as the man; but O the difference of strength wherewith the tiny fingers of a babe grasp an object, and the muscular hands of a stout man! So the hands of the feeblest babe in grace may take hold of the Person and work of Christ, and receive out of his fulness; but compare that feeble hand with the strong hand of the man blessed with sweet assurance and a holy, happy confidence, enabling him to rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

IV.—But it is time to advance to our last point, the cause that there is for *unceasing thankfulness* that God has a people who have received the word of God not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God: "*For which cause also thank we God without ceasing.*"

O there we sadly fail! What an ardent flame of heavenly love burnt in the breast of this man of God. He was praising God without ceasing for the blessing that rested upon his ministry. Here we come short; here we see how scanty is our measure of grace, compared with that of the apostle. And yet every Christian minister, every servant of God, must have

deep cause for thankfulness in seeing and believing that there is a people who have received his gospel, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth the word of God; and in having proofs and evidences how effectually it works in them that believe from beholding the fruits of faith as manifested by their lips and in their life. John could say, "I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth" (2 John 4); and again, "I have no greater joy, than to hear that my children walk in truth." (3 John 4.) So Paul could say to the Thessalonians: "For 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? For ye are our glory and joy." (1 Thess. 2:19, 20); and again, "Therefore, brethren, 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." (1 Thess. 3:7, 8.)

I hope, though I would wish to speak of myself humbly and modestly as becomes me,—yet I would fain hope that the Lord, not only here, but elsewhere, has caused the gospel I have preached to be received not as the word of men, but as it is, the word of God. And I hope there are those underneath this roof this evening who can set to their seal that they have received what I have said from time to time from this pulpit, not as the word of men, but as the word of God. They have felt at various times a power in the word, as if God himself were pleased to speak to their hearts by it; and from the effects realised by it, in the peace and joy it has communicated, in the liberty which it has brought, in the comfort which it has given, in the sweet assurance with which it has been attended, in the abiding effects which it has wrought, and the permanent effects which it has produced, they can look back and recognise it as having been to them the very voice of God. Now, my dear friends, this will stand, and stand for ever. If you have received what I have

spoken to you for these many years only as the word of men, when I am gone all will be gone, and I and it as much forgotten as if I had never preached in your ears the word of life. It will be as vain, as fleeting, as useless as the foam upon the water when stirred by a breeze, will all pass away as the smoke out of a chimney, or as the chaff of the summer threshing floors. Nay, worse, for where the gospel is not the savour of life unto life, it is the savour of death unto death (2 Cor. 2:16); and if our gospel be hid it is hid to them that are lost. (2 Cor. 4:3.) It will little profit you in the great day to have heard the gospel for many years if it has not been made the power of God to your salvation. Nay, it cannot but increase your condemnation to have seen the light and rebelled against it, to have heard the truth, and yet inwardly or outwardly, in heart or in life to have turned aside to lies.

But you who have received the gospel from my lips as the word of God, and found and felt its effectual power in your heart, will stand every storm and live at last. What you have thus heard and received has been for eternity. It has saved and sanctified your soul, and it will be owned of God at the last day as his voice through me to you. The faith raised up in your heart by the power of this word, the hope that has been communicated, and the love shed abroad by the Holy Ghost through it will all have his approbation in the great day when Christ shall come and all his saints with him. Then you who by his teaching and testimony have believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God, even you who can only say you desire to fear his name, be you weak or strong, will be found in him in that day accepted in the beloved. O that we may now be blessed with a sweet assurance that we shall then enter into the joy of the Lord; when all the infirmities of the flesh shall be forgotten, all the sins of our nature lost and buried in the grave, and we stand before the

throne, with palms in our hands and everlasting crowns upon our heads, and all sorrow and sighing for ever fled away.