

REPLY TO CARDINAL GIBBONS' SERMON

[FROM THE "OVERLAND MONTHLY"]

CARDINAL GIBBONS' sermon, widely published, attracted a great deal of attention amongst Protestants as well as Catholics. What will Protestantism say to this? was the query. We have heard but one Protestant response, and that, properly enough, from the pen of the best and most widely known Protestant minister in the world-- Pastor Russell of Brooklyn Tabernacle, New York:--

PASTOR RUSSELL CONGRATULATES THE CARDINAL

It falls to my lot to respond to Cardinal Gibbons' sermon on "A Plea for United Christendom," in which he urges very forcefully that there is but one Church, and that, therefore, all Protestants should abandon their sectarian attitude and join the Roman Catholic Church. The reply falls to my lot, because, although I stand free and independent of all Protestant sects and parties, my brethren of the ministry in various denominations of Protestantism would find it rather awkward and difficult to acknowledge that there is but one true Church, and, in the same breath to acknowledge that their denomination is no more than one church than is any other sect.

I am very pleased with Cardinal Gibbons' kindly moderation in the handling of the subject. It contrasts very forcibly with the terrible times of the past, when Roman Catholics on the one hand and various Protestant sects on the other, waged an indirect and internecine strife to the death in the name of God and of our Redeemer and of righteousness. Surely what all intelligent people need is to abandon foolish prejudices, hypocrisies and superstitions of the past, and to come together as true followers of the Nazarene. Everything which points in this direction is to be appreciated, whether coming from the lips of Cardinal Gibbons or from others. Surely we should all desire the Truth, and desiring it, should seek it in God's Word, of which the Master said, "Thy Word is Truth."

AGREES WITH CARDINAL GIBBONS

I am pleased to say that I agree most heartily with Cardinal Gibbons' presentation in almost every particular. Unquestionably sectarianism is wholly out of accord with the teachings of the Scriptures. Assuredly St. Paul rebuked the Corinthian brethren because they presented a divided front, saying, I am of Paul; I am of Apollos; I am of Peter, etc. St. Paul's reply to this was that it was proof of carnality, of fleshly minds, and proof of an unspiritual state. All Christians are coming to realize this--Catholic and Protestant--although it is but a few years since some claimed that sectarianism was a positive advantage; that it led to a greater zeal and energy in the Divine service than if all were agreed. [R4754 : page 37]

All who are conversant with history understand what I mean when I say that God has been pleased to permit an illustration of--first a united Christendom, and, secondly, a divided Christendom. For long centuries there was practically but one Church in Europe, the Roman Catholic. The results were surely not at all that could have been desired. That unity of Church brought neither secular nor religious education, nor did it bring to the world the Millennium promised as the great desideratum of humanity. Rather in that long period we see that ignorance and superstition held the reins. During the last few centuries we have had the opportunity of testing the division of Christendom into various sects and parties. While the results are not satisfactory, while the condition is not what God's Word prompts us to desire and expect, this divided condition has certainly tended toward greater freedom of thought, greater liberty from ignorance and superstition.

So, then, when we think of the Church, both Catholics and Protestants agree that we should not desire such a unity as prevailed during the period in history known as "the dark ages." The unity we seek and pray for is a knowledge-enlightened and more sanctified unity, which will not require to be maintained through the arm of civilized power, and the rack and thumb-screw and stake. Our prayers and desires should go up for the kind of liberty mentioned in the Bible--"the liberty wherewith *Christ makes free*"--"the liberty of the sons of God."

THE PERPLEXING QUESTION

So, then, dissatisfied with the sectarian divisions, and strife, and equally dissatisfied with the compulsory union of the past, and, convinced, nevertheless, that the Bible teaches the unity of the Church, we ask, How may this Scriptural unity be attained--the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace and love, which maintains its own liberty and grants the same to others? Where shall we find; how shall we obtain; by what process shall we accomplish this unity?

We agree with the Cardinal that our Lord speaks of himself in the Scriptures as the one Shepherd of the one flock of this Age and the Supervisor of the one fold. We agree that there is but the one Church, for whom the Master prayed during his dying hour--"That they all may be one in us." We agree also that the Apostle speaks of the one Church, likening it to a human body, over which there is the one Head, and of which all are members. We agree that there are not many bodies, but one; not many heads, but One. We agree, also, that there is but the one true Vine of the Father's right-hand planting, and that this refers to Christ, the parent stock, and to his true members, the branches. We agree, also, that as there is only one Lord, so there is but one faith, and, additionally, that there is but one baptism.

Agreeing with all these Scriptural premises laid down by Cardinal Gibbons, we must, nevertheless, dispute his conclusions, that this one Church which Christ declared he would build upon the rock of Truth, and which would grow to a glorious temple composed of living stones, of which St. Peter was one, is the Roman Church, just as we disagree with our Baptist friends when they tell us that the Baptist Church is the one Church. Equally we disagree with our Presbyterian and Methodist, Lutheran and Congregational systems when they each protest that they fill these requirements--that they are the one Church.

Our contention is that every one who turns his back upon sin; who accepts of Jesus as his Redeemer and Savior, and who approaches the Father in full consecration through Jesus, and who receives the begetting of the holy Spirit of God--all such are the brethren of Jesus and sons of God, whether they join the Roman Catholic, the Congregational, the Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian or other human systems. Our contention is that none of these human systems, Catholic or Protestant, is recognized by the Bible--none of them is recognized by God. They are all human institutions--originated by men and maintained by men; sometimes good men and sometimes bad men have had to do with their organization and maintenance.

Indeed, we hold that such a reformed, consecrated believer is equally a child of God in whatever denomination he may be, or if he be outside of all denominational walls or creeds. It is our contention that the various creeds of Christendom have been so many stumbling [**R4754 : page 38**] blocks and hindrances to honest souls who sought their God and the light of his Word. True, they may have assisted in some particulars, as well as they may have done injury in other respects. All the same, none of these institutions has Divine authority. None of them is sanctioned by the Word of God, the Bible. They are one and all built upon false assumptions.

WHICH IS THE TRUE CHURCH?

According to the Bible we may all find the answer we are seeking--an explanation of what and where is the true Church. In the Scriptures it is described as "the Church of the First-borns, whose names are written in heaven." ([Heb. 12:23](#).) Will our Protestant friends claim that their Church roll corresponds to that written in

Heaven in the Lamb's Book of Life? Would Christian friends of any denomination dare to make such a claim? Most assuredly, No. We all realize that at very most the various sects and parties of Christendom are composed of wheat and tares, and that, so far as human judgment can discern, the tares are vastly in the majority.

The Scriptures declare that the Lord knoweth them that are his! The intimation is that no one but the Lord certainly, truly, knows which are the true sheep and which are the goats in sheep's clothing. We are exhorted not to judge one another. "Condemn not that ye be not condemned." Each heart is Scripturally exhorted to have its own fellowship with God, not through synods or presbyteries, not through priests or popes. Every branch is to be vitally united to the Vine; every Christian, every member of the true Church, is to be vitally united to Christ.

In that very parable our Lord declares that every branch in him that bears not fruitage of the Spirit in love, the Father will cut off from membership. Thus, from the standpoint of Divine wisdom and knowledge the Church of Christ on the earth is composed only of saints--only of those who have fled away from sin, who by faith have laid hold upon the Redeemer and who have consecrated their lives unto death in the Divine service--and of these only such as maintain this standing and bring forth the peaceable fruits of righteousness.

So, then, without attempting a personal identification of the branches of the Vine, we may surely know that they are very few. We may surely know that the nominal membership of the various sects contain comparatively few of these saintly ones, who alone have Divine recognition as being "the Church of the First-borns whose names are written in heaven"--fruit-bearing branches in the true Vine, living stones in the temple of God imbued with the holy Spirit, active members in the Spirit-begotten Body of Christ.

To this conclusion the words of Scripture agree, assuring us that "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that go in thereat." They assure us again that these favored few number not many great, not many rich or learned, but chiefly the poor of this world, rich in faith, heirs of the Kingdom. They assure us that this Kingdom class must all be footstep followers of Jesus; as he said, "If any one would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me, that where I am, there shall my disciple be." And again he said, "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."

CHRISTIAN UNION NEVER LOST

From this standpoint we perceive that the great masses, Catholic and Protestant, are not, and never were, the Church of Christ; they deceive themselves. They have been children *of this world*, not spirit begotten *New Creatures* in Christ; they have not been living stones in the temple, not branches of the true Vine, not members of the "little flock." They have been worldly people with religious sentiments and good desires who misunderstood that great teaching of the Bible--that only the sanctified are in Christ Jesus, called to be saints. What has been done by these large numbers of well-meaning but mistaken people in the way of organizing churches, lodges, banks, etc., had nothing whatever to do with the great organization which God effected eighteen centuries ago, and which has persisted as a unit in the world ever since.

The true Church has never been divided, because each member of it is united with the Lord, the Head, and, through him, united to every other "member of his Body, which is the Church," the "little flock." In this one Church, there has always been maintained one Lord Jesus, one faith, his Word of promise, one baptism--the baptism of consecration into his death--to suffer with him that, by and by, we may reign with him.

THE HIDDEN MYSTERY

Does some one say, Where is the history of this Church? We answer, in the language of the Apostles, that

"the world knoweth us not, even as it knew him not." The world of Jesus' day were the professed religionists; yet they knew not the great religious Teacher [R4755 : page 38] and Redeemer whom God had sent, and they crucified him. Similarly all the way down, the great religious teachers of the various systems have not known, have not recognized the "members of the Body of Christ" a bit more than the Jews recognized the Head of that Body.

This is the very point which St. Paul emphasized. He declares that the fact, as well as the philosophy, of the Church being members of Christ is to the world--both the religious and the irreligious world--a Hidden Mystery; it is outside of their philosophy, their theory, their understanding. Hence it is that the most saintly characters, both in Catholicism and Protestantism, have been martyrs, as Jesus was, as St. Stephen was, as all the Apostles were, and all the faithful during the intermediate centuries were, and as some may yet be if an outward union be effected such as once prevailed--in the "Dark Ages."

COUNTERFEITING THE TRUE CHURCH

If now we declare that, to a certain extent, the true Church has been counterfeited, both by Catholics and Protestants, let no one take offense and suppose that we are wishing to speak unkindly. We do not charge that these counterfeits of the true Church were made knowingly or intentionally, but merely that the Church, coming under the control of brilliant minds not spirit-begotten, not heaven-enlightened, misread the Word of God, misinterpreted it, and followed their misinterpretations.

Notice, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church. The average Roman Catholic does not know that he is not a member of the Church. But Cardinal Gibbons will not deny it, nor will any of the ecclesiastics. Their teaching, most explicitly, is that the Church is composed of the Pope and the other religious instructors, and that the common people are not members of the Church, but, as they style them, "children of the Church."

Thus, the Catholic Church appropriates to itself the words of Jesus respecting the "little flock," etc.; they apply those Scriptures to the clergy, and not to the congregation. This is the secret of Papacy's great mistake. [R4755 : page 39] In their ecclesiastical system they have a counterfeit of the true Church. And because the Scriptures declare that the Lord's faithful "little flock," "the Church of the living God whose names are written in heaven," will reign with Christ, therefore Papacy claims, on the strength of that promise, the right to reign with imperial power and heavenly authority over its kingdoms of earth. And it has been Papacy's endeavor to carry out this erroneous reasoning, and to make good its counterfeit of the true Church and her work, that has led to so many grievous difficulties, persecutions, wars, turmoils.

THE TRUE REIGN OF THE SAINTS

If Papacy has the counterfeit of the true Church and the counterfeit of the true reign, what does the Bible teach respecting the genuine? This: That the faithfulness of the unknown, disesteemed, rejected of men, saintly followers in Jesus' footsteps, constitutes their schooling, testing, preparation for a share in the Kingdom with Christ their Lord.

When the full number of the elect Church, predestinated of the Father, shall have been thus gathered out of the world and finally glorified--then the Kingdom to which they are heirs will be established, and they shall be joint-heirs with Jesus Christ their Lord, King of kings and Lord of lords. His Kingdom will rule the world, not by guns or swords, not by racks or burning at the stake and inquisitorial torments, but by heavenly power, which then will have full control of earth's affairs.

CHILDREN OF THE CHURCH

What our Catholic friends have is merely a foreshadowing --or, shall I use the harsher word *counterfeit* --of the Truth respecting the Church as a mother and certain children. The Scriptures teach that, in the new order

of things, when Christ shall take to himself his great power and institute his Messianic Kingdom for the blessing and uplifting of mankind, he will have a Bride --the Church--"The Bride, the Lamb's Wife." ([Rev. 21:9](#).) And the Scriptures further represent that the glorified Jesus, who is the heavenly Bridegroom, and the glorified Church, who is the heavenly Bride, will, figuratively, beget children. That is to say, all through the thousand years of the reign of righteousness the glorified Jesus will be the everlasting Father, or Giver of everlasting life, on the earthly plane to Adam, and all of his children who will accept it on the terms of the Kingdom. Then the Church will be the mother or nourisher and caretaker of all mankind to uplift them, instruct them, develop them, in the ways of righteousness--to bring as many as will prove willing up to the full perfection of human nature and life everlasting. All refusing this uplift and rejecting the grace of God will be destroyed in the Second Death. St. Peter tells us that their destruction will be similar to that of the brute beast that perisheth. --[2 Pet. 2:12](#).

ARE THERE PROTESTANT COUNTERFEITS?

Although Protestants repudiate the Roman Catholic idea that the clergy alone constitute the Church, and that the people are the children of the Church, nevertheless in many denominations we see this insidious error in a slightly different form. This is notably true of the Episcopal Church, which puts everything in the way of government into the hands of the clergy and treats the laity, to a considerable degree, as though they were children unable to comprehend spiritual things. The Methodist Episcopal Church follows closely in the same line of procedure. The Presbyterian and Lutheran systems also quite particularly differentiate the clergy from the laity, even though the laity be given some apparent recognition on the ecclesiastical boards. This is done usually for a reward or for the purpose of securing financial or legal advice. But the laity is not supposed to have an equal standing with the clergy in respect to spiritual things.

Congregationalists and Baptists and Disciples most nearly recognize an equality between the clergy and laity and that *the entire Church of God*, whoever they may be, *are a Royal Priesthood*. Yet even with these congregational bodies there is an attempt made to separate between clergy and laity, and to hold all the spiritual power and authority in the hands of the clergy. This is done along financial lines in the Congregational Church through the so-called Congregational Union.

In the Baptist Church the ministers combine in what is known as a Baptist Ministers' Association, which holds the reins over the people as parents over children, and tells them whom they may call for a Pastor and whom not--whom the Association is willing to ordain as their Pastor, and whom it will refuse. Thus the same spirit is manifested in all these earthly systems, and by it they are all distinctly differentiated from the true Church and her Scriptural regulations, which declare, All ye are brethren--and One is your Master, even Christ, and One is your Pope, or Father, even God.

ROYAL PRIESTHOOD COMPOSED OF SAINTS REGARDLESS OF DENOMINATION

So, then, we ask Cardinal Gibbons to consider with us the Scriptural teaching which we have presented, namely, that the *Royal Priesthood* is composed exclusively of saints, regardless of whether they belong to their clergy or laity, or are to be found elsewhere--"The Lord knoweth them that are his." We ask the Cardinal to consider that this one Church is indivisible; that the Heavenly Father is the Husbandman of this true Vine; that he does not suffer any to remain as branches, members, of the true Church unless they bring forth the true fruit of the Vine.

We ask the Cardinal to consider the Scriptural teaching that this saintly class, already vitally united with Jesus, is now the espoused virgin class mentioned by St. Paul ([2 Cor. 11:3](#)), and that they are waiting for the completion of their number, when the Heavenly Bridegroom, at his Second Coming, will receive them to himself in glory. By the power of the First Resurrection they will be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of

an eye, and be with their Lord and be like him. Then, as the Scriptures declare, will come the marriage of the Lamb, "for his Wife hath made herself ready." And shortly after that will come the Messianic Kingdom and the Times of Regeneration mentioned by our Lord, when his faithful will sit with him in the Throne, and the regeneration of Adam's race, the giving to them of new life from the Life-Giver, will begin.

As for the great and prosperous human institutions which are more or less duplicating the Lord's Kingdom all over the world, these also, in the Scriptures, are called vines--the vine of the earth, in contrast with the Vine of the Heavenly Father's right-hand planting. It is not for us to determine how much good and how much harm these earthly churches, vines of the earth, have accomplished. That the Lord will declare in his own season, but he tells us that the grapes borne by these vines-- anger, malice, hatred, envy strife, evil-speaking, etc.-- will overflow the wine-press of the wrath of God in the near future, and bring upon the world that great time of trouble, which all may see upon the horizon and which, the Lord declares, will be such a time of trouble as the world has never known.--[*Daniel 12:1*](#); [*Matt. 24:21*](#).

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