

Perfection through Fellowship.

BY THE LATE REV. W. A. GRAY, ELGIN.

'That they without us should not be made perfect.'—Heb. xi. 40.

PERFECTION through fellowship,—that is what the text brings before us. It is the principle of interdependence that obtains among the saints, by which no class and no individual is perfected apart from other classes and other individuals—to the unifying of religious society and the filling up of the body of Christ. Did you ever notice how often the writer to the Hebrews refers to perfection? The thought is constantly in his heart. The word is constantly on his lips. What faith is to Paul, what works are to James, what hope is to Peter, what love is to John, perfection is to the author of the book before us. It is the grace he has ever in his mind. It is the vision he has ever in his eye. Thus of the law he says, 'It made nothing perfect.' Of the Saviour he says that, 'being made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation to as many as believe.' Of the Church he says that 'it is a better and more perfect tabernacle.' Of the redeemed gone home he says that they are 'the spirits of just men made perfect.' And so, through the whole list of instances, in which the thought of perfection comes constantly before us—man being at one time represented as made perfect by Christ, and, what is stranger still, if we had time to dwell on it, Christ being at another time represented as made perfect by man.

Here, however, it is neither man as perfected by Christ, nor is it Christ as perfected by man, but man as perfected through man, the sympathy which man bestows, the knowledge which man conveys, the experience which man supplies, the example which man exhibits, the joy which man occasions. Blessed are they that receive, in this perfecting of man through man, but more blessed are they that give. Blessed are they that can say, 'I am perfected through others'; more blessed are they that can say, 'Others are perfected through me.' And the latter is the standpoint of the text. Taking that standpoint as our own, then, let us seek some illustrations of the principle, and notice how the Church of the law is perfected in the Church of the gospel, how the Church in heaven

is perfected in the Church of earth, how the Church of the past is perfected in the Church of the present, and how the Church of the body in general is perfected in the Church of the members in particular.

I.

We begin, then, by noting how the Church of the law is perfected by the Church of the gospel. That is the case the apostle is dealing with. He has just been describing the Church of the law. A glorious bead-roll he unfolds, too. Hero after hero is named, witness after witness is specified. And together with these heroes and witnesses is the record of the great things they had done. No one can possibly say, with chapter 11 of Hebrews before him, that the author in any way disparages the saints and the sainthood of the Church of the law. He praises them, he exalts them, he glorifies them, and that, too, with a fervour and a glow which thrill and inspire us while we read. How will he end? How will he sum up? What is the application he will make? What is the inference he will draw? The sequel will surely be this, 'We are made perfect in them.' So rich is the character they exhibit! So rare is the pattern they hold up! So high and so holy are the impulses they yield! I say, the sequel will surely be this, 'We are made perfect in them.' But that is not what the writer says. He gives the thought another and quite unexpected turn. And he says, 'They are made perfect in us.' Very strange! They, the prophets and wise men of one dispensation dependent upon *us*, the babes and the sucklings of another! They, the flower and the chivalry of the old order, dependent upon *us*, the tyros and beginners of the new!

Yes; but with us is the advantage notwithstanding. Ours is the higher standpoint. Ours is the loftier level. There is one thing that makes all the difference, and that is the relationship to redemption. To them redemption was a hope—a sure hope it is true, a saving hope it is true, but still no more than a hope: to us redemption is a

fact. To them redemption was a prospect, to us redemption is a reality. Long had the fathers awaited that fact. Long had the fathers desired that reality. They had awaited and desired it in the land of the living. And when life passed by and it came not, they awaited and desired it in the realms of the dead. And while they waited and desired, they were not, and could not, be perfected. They could not be perfect in satisfaction. They could not be perfect in privilege. They could not be perfect in joy. What brought them that perfecting? What introduced them into fuller light? What introduced them into fuller liberty? What but the coming of the fact they had waited and desired? What but the advent of the day which Abraham in the intermediate state saw afar? I mean the arrival of Christ. I mean the appearance of Him who was 'manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory,' a Christ incarnate, crucified, risen, the establisher of a new economy, the author of a new peace.

What rapture the tidings awoke, what praises the tidings occasioned, we know not. But rapture and praises there were, as the prophets and patriarchs in paradise swelled the songs of a finished salvation, saying, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood!' Yet, blessed as the patriarchs and prophets were, with fresh accessions of happiness, fresh inflowings of peace, when they learned in their holy retreats that a Saviour had fought and conquered, and now reigned for ever supreme—blessed as the patriarchs and prophets were in the knowledge of events such as these, were they perfected alone? No; there was another class to be reckoned. There was another company to be gathered in. There was the class, the company, whom the apostle refers to when he says 'us.' Who are these? Who are these for whose benefit the Church of the law had to tarry, for whose coming the Church of the law had to wait? Who but the Church of the gospel—the Church of the evangelists and apostles. They were a small band then. They were a scattered band. They were persecuted, afflicted, forsaken. And, in the consciousness of these facts, they were sometimes apt to weary, sometimes apt to faint. It is different now; but think what things were then. And think how Paul's argument must have cheered them. 'You

may think yourselves little,' he says, 'you may think yourselves worthless. You may think yourselves little and worthless as compared with that great cloud of witnesses whose names I have mentioned, whose deeds I have told, and who now are resting from their labours while their works do follow them. But you are really great. You are really worthy. And that, too, to such a degree that you are necessary to those whom you envy, necessary to their testimony, necessary to their happiness, necessary to their fulness of life. *They, without you, cannot be made perfect.*'

So the Church of the law is perfected in the Church of the gospel, and cannot be perfected apart from it. And is not that the lesson of the Transfiguration? Two companies were represented then. There was the company symbolized by Moses and Elias, the company of the Jewish saints gone home. These were glorified by Christ, as they talked together of His decease. But there was another company than the company symbolized by Moses and Elias,—there was the company symbolized by Peter and John, the company of the Christian believers gathered in. And these, too, were brought up to the holy mount. These, too, were baptized in the shining cloud. These, too, were the spectators of the heavenly vision. And what was the meaning? What was the reason? What but the principle of the text? *That the one family, apart from the other, should not be made perfect.*

II.

But this is only an illustration of a greater truth, to which we accordingly proceed. Not only is the Church of the law made perfect in the Church of the gospel, we may widen the circle still further, and say the Church in heaven is perfected through the Church on earth. How? In two ways. The Church on earth is the present means of its training. And the Church on earth is the future sharer of its joy.

1. The Church on earth *is the present means of its training.* 'What,' perhaps some one says, 'can you speak of training in connexion with the Church in heaven? We thought it was beyond need of training. What need of training when the lesson is learnt? What need of training when the character is formed?' My brethren, I believe that neither is the lesson so fully learnt, nor is the

character so fully formed, as to dispense with training. Sin may have gone, but not ignorance, and not weakness. Believers grow in heaven. They make progress. They are ever discovering in heaven—discovering new depths of doctrine to sound, new heights of duty to climb. And therefore they are ever being trained. And one means of training is—what? The history of the struggles and the victories, the history of the toils and successes, of the Church that is here upon earth. How vision is widened, how knowledge is increased, how faith is confirmed, as that history constantly unfolds itself, with its proofs of a sovereign wisdom, with its testimony to a sovereign power. Of course that means that the Church in heaven is a spectator of the Church on earth—a fact which few are adequately impressed with, which few have so much as taken in. But why should we doubt that it *is* so? Scripture is on our side. Not to speak of the Book of Revelation, and the sanction it gives to the thought, by once and again implying that heaven looks down upon earth, take the words of our Lord Himself: ‘There is joy in the presence of the angels in heaven over one sinner that repenteth!’ Grant that, and you grant the whole contention! For if the repenting sinner be observed, then why not the growing believer? And if the growing believer be seen, then why not the body of which he forms a part—the whole Church of Christ, with its ever-unfolding drama of sin and pardon, of peril and deliverance, of failure and success, through all the ages and on to the end of time? No; they are not so unknowing and uninterested as we think them—the spirits that are now in glory. They watch their brethren below. They learn from their brethren below. And if this be the case, may we not say that the Church in heaven is perfected in the Church on earth, inasmuch as the Church on earth is the present means of its training?

2. And the Church in heaven is perfected in the Church on earth, inasmuch as the Church on earth *is the future sharer of its joy*. Of the loved and lost who have left us and are now made most glad for ever, yea exceeding glad in the light of God’s countenance, it is natural, it is intelligible, to say, ‘We without them are not perfect.’ I say it is natural and intelligible to say *that*. So near did they come to us, so constantly were they with us, that they came to be part of ourselves. We

leaned on them for help. We repaired to them for sympathy. Their existence so blent with us, their qualities so fitted into us, that what we lacked they made up, what we failed in they supplied. And when death removed them, it was as the wrenching off of half of our being, the plucking away of half of our life. We are impoverished. We are dismembered. We pine and we halt. Of the loved and the lost, then, it is natural, it is intelligible, to say, ‘We without them are not perfect.’ But the text gives another thought. If *we without them are not perfect, neither are they without us perfect*. They miss us. They wait us. Yes, amidst all that surrounds them, of new experience, of new fellowship, of new occupation, of new thought, there is a longing to be satisfied, there is a gap to be filled. And a gap to be filled—by whom? A gap to be filled by us—the friends and associates they have left behind. They are interested in their brethren’s pilgrimage. They yearn for their brethren’s home-coming. Our absence is the lessening of their nature. Our detention is the postponing of their joy. I think we may safely take the comfort of this thought, if so be our standpoint be a Christian one—the standpoint of Christian mourners in relation to their Christian dead. Forget us—how can they? Be indifferent—how can they? We are necessary to their well-being. We are conditions of their bliss. It is an arrangement that God approves of, because it is an arrangement which God has appointed, that ‘*they without us should not be made perfect*.’

III.

We have noted how the Church of the law is perfected in and through the Church of the gospel. We have noted, too, how the Church in heaven is perfected in and through the Church on earth, as the present means of its training, as the future and final sharer of its joy. Let us now take the principle in another aspect, and note *how the Church of the past is perfected in the Church of the present*. Here, again, the saying may seem strange. We would have expected it to run differently. We would have expected it to be phrased: *We, apart from the past, are imperfect*. For the past has made us what we are. From countless sources, along countless channels, the tide of advantage comes down, bearing blessings to one and to all of us—blessings mental, moral, and

spiritual, blessings of knowledge, blessings of peace, blessings of liberty. From the past we receive our privileges. To the past we owe our inspiration. Just think what we would all be this day if the past were cut off from us—its riches withdrawn, its influence stopped. Very far from well furnished! Very far from complete! Apart from the past, the present cannot be perfected.

But it is equally true to say that, apart from the present, the past cannot be perfected. It cannot be perfected, any more than the flower can be perfected apart from the fruit, or the dawn can be perfected without the day. Through the long, long ages there has been a steady process of perfecting, and the torch of truth passed onward from hand to hand, becoming brighter and yet brighter, with every succeeding stage. So, in the realm of science, what the fathers originate the sons develop. What one generation discovers another generation applies. So that the earlier is being completed by the later, and ancestry crowned by posterity. And what holds true in the realm of science holds true in the realm of religion. Every one falleth in his own order. First comes Christ, the principle and the spring of the whole. But the teaching of Christ is carried out and expanded by the teaching of Paul, and the teaching of Paul is carried out and expanded by the teaching of Luther. And the teaching of Luther is carried out and expanded by the teaching of the Church of to-day. Yes, it is God's way this, that the ages may feel they are linked. It is God's way this, that the ages may feel they depend on each other. Yesterday waits on to-day, as for that matter to-day must wait on to-morrow, for the ampler explanation of its meaning, for the wider discovery of its truth. If it has light, then, let the Church of to-day bring it. If it has truth, let the Church of to-day speak it. If it has testimony, let the Church of to-day render it. The Church of the past requires it. It requires it to supply what is lacking; requires it to expand what is elementary; requires it to illumine what is dim. It is ours to contribute what it asks. For apart from us, that is, the Church of the present, they, that is, the Church of the past, cannot be fully perfected.

IV.

We have noted how the Church of the law is perfected through the Church of the gospel, the Church in heaven through the Church on earth,

and the Church of the past through the Church of the present—note *how the Church of the body as a whole is perfected by the Church of the individual members.* We believe, do we not, that there is such a body? There is a system, partly visible and partly invisible, oftener perhaps invisible, which is ever working for happiness, ever working for healthfulness, ever working for holiness, ever working for good. There is a society that intertwines itself with all earthly societies, a kingdom that intertwines itself with all worldly kingdoms, but is higher at the same time than them all, working ever for the glory of God, and the welfare and prosperity of redeemed mankind. And this system, this society, this kingdom, by what is it furthered, by what is it made effectual? By the lives of individual men. By the lives of you and of me. *Apart from us it cannot be made perfect.* But *with us and through us its perfection is sure.* No man liveth to himself, no man dieth unto himself; he lives and dies to the body, he lives and dies to the whole.

And what a meaning and a glory are shed upon two things—human labour and human sorrow! Take human labour. It seems often very irksome, often very menial, often very profitless. It works no apparent deliverance. It bears no apparent fruit. What do you know about that? Unawares to yourself, these labours contribute to the general religious scheme, further the general religious good. There are cords you see not, that bind you to a mighty fellowship; and, travelling upon these, the acts that seem useless, the toils that seem vain, pass up and away into regions unguessed, to enrich, to strengthen, to inspire. They are not lost; they are saved and used, as powers in God's great system, as factors in God's great plan.

What holds good with human labour holds good with human sorrow. Human sorrow, too, looks sometimes very meaningless. It seems so capricious in its visitations—sparing the evil, lying hard on the good and the saintly. It seems so useless in its effects. But, again, what do you know of *that*? It may be you are suffering for the body's sake—the sake of a higher end and a wider constituency than you know. And the body may get the blessing of your sufferings. They may get it in the example which your sufferings afford, in the prayers which your sufferings draw forth. Oh, let us live as in the sight of the larger company the witnesses below, as well as the witnesses above,

whom, all unknown to ourselves, we may be inspiring by our constancy and uplifting by our faith! More may be hanging on our conduct than we know, even the safety of our brethren's footsteps, the clearness of our brethren's hope. God has ordained it that without *us*, without our labour, without our suffering, they should not be made perfect.

Such are some feeble attempts to illustrate a great and a deep subject—perfection through fellowship. There is no time left to apply it. But the applications are clear and seasonable.

There is the application to Church life, the drawing of individuals into companies, the drawing, too, of different companies into one, for the furtherance of mutual communion, and the visible exhibition to a hostile world of the unity that is in Christ. The feeling is growing against needless divisions. And men in this place and in that are being increasingly impressed with the principle: *We without them, they without us, are not perfect.*

There is the application, too, to missionary endeavour. Has not heathendom a voice? Has not heathendom a message? And if it uttered that voice, if it published that message, would not the voice and the message be this: 'Come over and help us; we without you, you without us, are not perfect!' Ah, brethren, have we ever realized the fact that, apart from the welfare of the heathen, our own welfare is not full? May not much of the scepticism and discussion at home be owing to the fact that we have not as yet realized it? And

till we do realize it, till the churches awake to the consciousness, till the churches address themselves to the work, the scepticism and dissension will continue. The heathen are knocking at our doors. They say, 'Teach us, train us, save us. Do so for our sakes. Do so, for your own sakes. *Apart from us ye cannot be made perfect.*'

And once more there is the application, not only to church life and missionary endeavour, but to the character and the greatness of Christ. God wants that character completely mirrored. He wants that greatness to be completely displayed. Where? Where but in the Church, which is the reflexion of His glory—the fulness of Him that filleth all in all. It is by the Church, and by nothing but the Church, that He seeks to make known to the principalities and powers of heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God. The fact that He does so is a proof and a pledge that not one member of the Church shall be forgotten and not one member of the Church shall be left out. Each in his own fashion, each to his own degree, reflects some aspect of Christ, and is therefore necessary to the glory of the Christ he reflects. And without the weakest and the most obscure the general revelation is partial, the general roll incomplete. You are necessary to the fulfilment of God's plan, and shall never fail of God's care. Though thou wert the last lingering saint in a world from which the other saints are all taken home, Christ will wait for thee, the redeemed will wait for thee, heaven will wait for thee, for without thee they cannot be perfected.

Little Contributions to the Greek Testament.

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I. JOHN xiv. 9.

How are we to punctuate?—

οὐκ ἔγνωκάς με, Φίλιππε; ὁ ἑωρακὼς, οὐ οὐκ ἔγνωκάς με; Φίλιππε, ὁ ἑωρακὼς.

The modern editors connect the name with the first sentence, the older ones with the second.

Wordsworth-White in their *Latin N.T.* say that the latter way—'me? *Philippe, qui?*'—is found in the official Vulgate, '*et. gr. Steph. 1550.*' The latter part of this statement is wrong. I verified

the passage in the oldest editions of the Greek Testament and found—

με, Φίλιππε; ὁ in Stephen 1546. 49. 50. 51; Beza 1604;

the older punctuation—

με; Φίλιππε, ο in Compl. Erasm.,¹ Ald., Beza 1565. 82. 88. 98; Elzevir. 1624. 41.¹

Scrivener in his useful edition 'according to the

¹ The Bible Society's reprints of the T.R. departed in this instance, and in many others, from the original.