

## EPISTLES OF CHRIST.

BY DR. A. J. GORDON.

"Ye are our epistle written in our hearts known and read of all men; forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart." 2 Cor. iii. 2, 3.

THE meaning of these words is obvious if we trace the connection with what goes before. It was the custom of the early church, when one was journeying, to bear letters of recommendation from his particular congregation to the church in the city to which he went. Such a letter Paul says he did not need. He had no occasion to carry an epistle written or printed with ink. The Christians whom he had begotten in the gospel were his sufficient commendation. The impression which by the Spirit of God he had stamped upon their hearts, was the best testimony to his apostleship.

And so enlarging upon the figure, he calls them the "Epistle of Christ." As they bore witness to the apostle's fidelity, much more did they to the grace of our Lord Jesus. And if he, by his preaching, had stamped them with powerful impressions, much more had the Spirit of God done so. And hence he adds, "Ministered by us" and "written with the Spirit of the living God." Applying the text to the disciple of Christ let us note how he fulfils the idea of a living epistle.

I. HE IS AN EPISTLE OF COMMENDATION.

But who is commended? Not the BEARER of the epistle, but the SENDER of it; "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be an epistle of Christ." That is to say, Jesus Christ sends us forth to commend him to men, to make them see the excellence and worthiness and purity of his character. You may form the most exalted conception of a person whom you have never seen, by means of a letter which he has written. Christ is unseen by the world, but every consistent disciple of his is an epistle written in the living hand-writing of a consecrated character and an unworldly life.

And it is an epistle that cannot be counterfeited; for of all forgeries, hypocrisy is the most transparent. A man may succeed in imitating the signature of his neighbor so as to escape detection; but

the hand-writing of the Spirit of God cannot be counterfeited. Hence I believe, that of all impositions hypocrisy is least likely to be successful. Religion is too subtle a thing to be personated by bold and unscrupulous deceiver. It is to find an essence to be compounded out of such coarse materials as falsehood and sanctimoniousness; men detect the cheat at once. And no artificial odors of sanctity can ever take the place of the spontaneous fragrance of true devotion. Such epistles of Christ deliberately counterfeited are not greatly to be feared.

But the real danger is that true Epistles of Christ be corrupted, so that having an authentic origin and a genuine signature when sent out, they may not be true in their practical testimony to men. Here for example is a real Christian; but by his contact with the world, the lines of his religious character have become worn down so that instead of being distinct and sharply defined, one has to look at them a long time to discover exactly what the spell. That is the kind of Christians that do the most harm—*Illegible Christians*—epistles whose faded hand-writing seem to mean neither one thing nor another to those who look upon it.

It is a great point gained by the enemy if he can reduce a Christian to this state.

For *neutrality* is the next best thing for him to *hostility*. And if he cannot inscribe a man with the signature of hypocrisy or enmity, he does his best to *sponge out* the marks of true religion with which he has been inscribed, so that he shall give a doubtful or equivocal testimony.

Who does not feel that the greatest injury that Christ is sustaining in his church to day from his brethren, is not the injury of denial or deliberate betrayal, but of religious neutrality. There is such a lack of emphasis and force in the witness of so many Christians. There may be no palpable inconsistency in their social and religious conduct, but there is a lack of point to their *conversation*. Their Christianity does not assert itself. It not only does not create any counter-current in the great tides of worldly conformity in which it floats, but it does not leave even a bubble or a ripple to show that it stood as a rock to resist them.

But is the sin of living thus a mere *neg-*



ative offence? Nay! Nay! "He that is not for me is against me." It is not simply what *we are* but what Christ is, that we are set in this world to exemplify. He professes to be the *power of God* for inspiring all who believe in him with the spirit of self-denying unworldliness and devoted love. Can he do it? Can he who disappeared 1800 years ago from the earth, so transmit the force and inspiration of godliness to men, that though unseen himself, his claim can be made good by the attesting lives of his followers? That is the question which he calls upon us to answer. And how are we answering it? Not surely by a religious conservatism that sits so lightly on our hearts, that it allows us to break every vow we have made with indifference! Not by a devotion that is so sleepy and sluggish that it bends with hardly an impulse of resistance to every chance influence of worldly ease and indulgence, that sweeps over us! Oh! let us realize the fact with all its momentous significance, that just as Christ lives for us in heaven, we are to live for him on earth. He is our great epistle of commendation to the Father. The wounds of his glorified humanity,—the nail-prints of his sufferings on the cross,—the spear-marks of his once opened side,—these are the signatures and hand-writing which commend us to the grace and mercy of God. What if these should cease to bear their witness? What if he should cease from lifting them up before the throne, as the pledge and credential of our redemption? That he *will not* and *cannot* is the ground of all our spiritual peace. And can we consent on our part to give either a negative or doubtful commendation to him before our fellow men? For his sake as well as our own, let us be true to our professions.

When the writing on some of the old manuscripts of the New Testament became dim and nearly obliterated by age, they were used for other purposes, the word of God being written over by the records of secular and common affairs. These parchments were called palimpsests; and it was a great art among those who were searching for old manuscripts of the New Testament, to restore the original writing.

Now are there not a great many *palimp-*

*sests* among the Epistles of Christ? I do not mean false epistles, but those in which the true and original inscriptions of grace have been covered up by the marks of overlying worldliness. And they who read them say, "What do these more than others?" They fail to see any traces of superior holiness and so Christ is not discerned in the persons of his disciples. Oh! what we need is a revival of the Spirit—to erase the impressions of the world that have covered us all over, and to bring out again into clear and *glorious relief*, the *faded lines* of our consecration. If we could see the eloquent traces of divine love once more shining out in our faces, in our examples, in our reconstructed walk and conversation. If we could only be what Christ meant we should be, all that behold us would take knowledge of us that we had been with Jesus; and as Paul said to the Corinthians, the very unbelievers and deniers coming into our meetings would be convinced, and "falling down on their faces would worship God, and report that God is in us of a truth."

#### HE IS A SELF-EVIDENCING EPISTLE :

"known and read of all men" are the terms in which it is described.

It is the highest glory of a genuine Christian that he does not need any interpreter, that his life in other words speaks for itself. If one is all the time dwelling on his attainments, he inevitably gives the impression of unreality; as though he were trying to force his religious life up to a higher level in the public estimation than really belongs to it. As blessed a thing therefore as it is for one *to seem to be* what he is, it is even more blessed *to be* what he seems to be. And if we ever attain to perfection in this life, we had best not speak of it, for that will be to cast suspicion on our attainments. True perfection, like the Perfect One himself, "does not cry, nor lift up, nor cause its voice to be heard in the streets." It reveals itself in the life of him who possesses it, like healthy blood under a clear skin, and does not need to be announced by any paint of dazzling profession.

I am not commending silence as a desirable evidence of Christianity. No duty is more clear than that of witnessing for Christ. But a witness has to do with an-



other and not with himself. He is on oath to tell what he knows for the credit of him whose character is on trial. There is no magnifying of self in that. Bear witness then, oh believer, to all that you have seen and known of him who is altogether lovely. You are thereby but reading to men the writing which he has inscribed upon your heart. But be not content with this. Live so that you may give even stronger testimony by the silent witness of a well ordered life, that men may read the beauty of the Lord in every lineament of your character.

We cannot attach too great importance to a consistent Christian example as a means of commending Christ to men. Paul's words to Timothy are of universal application. "Be thou therefore an example of believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." And such an example cannot be an artificial or fictitious thing. Example is the shadow of the man, and every shadow must be the shadow of something. It cannot be projected without the substance. Hence, the great thing is *to be* holy in order to appear to be holy.

I suppose we have really no conception of the power of simple moral character upon men. This is the Epistle that *edifies and convinces*. It does its work unconsciously and without volition. Like Peter's shadow it heals those upon whom it falls. And yet while an example does its work so quietly, do we realize what that example costs? It comprises into itself the toil, the discipline, the self-culture and the consecration of a lifetime. It is the summary of the whole man. It is the whole life uttering itself in one comprehensive plea for the gospel.

HE IS AN INSPIRED EPISTLE.

"Written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God."

To our question therefore, how shall I be what is here required of me, this is the answer: "Not by might, or by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord." We may strive diligently to order our conduct and govern our lives. We may use the utmost caution to be true and constant in the outward manifestations of our temper. But do the best we can, we cannot be our own *amanuensis*, or dictate to our-

selves a perfect life. If, according to the word of the Apostle, we are *filled* with the Spirit, He will shine out in every line and utterance of our character to transfigure it with a divine significance.

We need therefore to give the most diligent heed to the *inward*, in order that the *outward* may be exemplary and true. By the word of God, we want to keep ourselves in constant communion with the Spirit who lives and breathes therein. We want to feel daily the fresh and warm infusion of his *divine* life. We want through him to get the letter of holy scripture translated into the living letter of our lives, that so we may be filled with all the knowledge of God's will, and be ever uttering that will in "all holy conversation and godliness."

#### PREMILLENNIAL DOCTRINE.

BY REV. N. WEST, D. D.

THEREFORE, at the close of a long life devoted to the study of God's Word, and having prayed that He, who alone can open the eyes of the blind, would vouchsafe that mercy to me, as He did to Bartimæus, and the two wanderers to Emmaus, do I desire to leave on record my unalterable conviction of the truth of the pre-millennial doctrine, a doctrine no other than this, that the second coming of Christ precedes the millennial kingdom "underneath all heavens,"—a doctrine for which the prophet Daniel stood at the Babylonian and Persian courts, winning glory for God and honor for himself and his friends. It is not that a man's convictions are either the measure or the test of "Truth," or his emotions a proof that his creed is right. The Holy Spirit often dwells in sanctifying power where He does not dwell as an illuminating power in the deep things of God, and time embalms the errors it does not destroy, and creeds are propagated from father to son. But it is that the long, prayerful, and independent study of the truth, with a sincere desire to know it, and a heart honest enough to receive it, does bring with it a self-evidencing and self-interpreting light, by which the truth is sealed to the conscience in the sight of God, with a certitude transcending all conjectures, and superior to all the changes of human feel-