

# **GOD'S GREATEST WONDER**

**THE CHURCH**

**ITS**

**FOUNDATION**

**GROWTH**

**ENEMIES**

**TRIUMPH**

**PROSPERITY**

**MONTAGUE  
GOODMAN**

# God's Greatest Wonder

THE STORY OF  
THE CHURCH

BY

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# CONTENTS

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	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
WHAT THE WONDER IS, .. ..	3
CHAPTER II.	
HOW THE CHURCH BEGAN, .. ..	8
CHAPTER III.	
HOW THE CHURCH TOOK SHAPE, .. ..	15
CHAPTER IV.	
HOW THE CHURCH WAS OPPOSED, .. ..	26
CHAPTER V.	
HOW THE CHURCH TRIUMPHED, .. ..	37
CHAPTER VI.	
HOW THE CHURCH SPREAD AND PROSPERED, .. ..	50

# GOD'S GREATEST WONDER.

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## CHAPTER I.

### What the Wonder Is.

[T may be truly said that Wonder is the hallmark of God, for "He alone doeth great wonders" (Psa. 136. 4), "He is fearful in praises doing wonders" (Exod. 15. 11). On the one hand man is incapable of achieving a wonder; on the other, God is incapable of doing anything else. "ALL His works praise Him" (Psa. 145. 10).

The greatest achievement of man is but a nine days' wonder; which diminishes with familiarity, until the wonder of it finally disappears; but the smallest work of God has in it the element of permanent mystery, which increases the more it is investigated. Truly "His ways are past finding out" (Rom. 11. 33). When a thing is "found out" the wonder ceases; whereas the element of mystery is essential to God. "Can a man by searching find out God?" (Job

#### 4      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

11. 7). "His name shall be called Wonderful" (Isa. 9. 6), because His works are of this intrinsic character—and that without parade or display, so that the wonder often lies beneath the surface of what have become to us common things. A blade of grass is wonderful equally with the starry heavens.

"Earth's crammed with Heaven,  
And every common bush aflame with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes."

Man always seeks to eliminate the wonderful and probe the mysterious, as Moses at the bush turned aside to see this great sight, why the bush was not consumed.

#### **The Wonder of the Word.**

Man would rob the Word of God of every supernatural element, and he would do the same with the Son of God. The Bible without miracle would be man's book, but not God's; as Christ without miracle would be man's ideal, but not God's Son. Both would lack the hallmark of wonder. But it is only to faith that the wonder is revealed.

Well might the Psalmist pray, "Open thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law" (Psa. 119. 18).

Now, while all God's works are wonderful, His greatest wonders are displayed in His dealings with His greatest creature, man; and it is the unfolding of these that is the main theme of the Word of God. It is here that we have the climax of wonder; something wholly unforeseen and undreamed of by man, yet clearly conceived in the purpose of God before the world was. A mystery hidden in the heart of God until in the fulness of time it should be revealed and brought to pass.

### The Wonder of Israel.

Truly it was foreshadowed in the enacted wonder of Israel; a nation born in a day, redeemed out of Egypt, a nation without a king, or a country, divinely fed, protected, guarded, and sustained in a waste, howling, wilderness, and brought into a land of promise to the astonishment of all the nations of the

## 6      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

the world. A nation whose subsequent history had been the outstanding demonstration of the finger of God among men for all time. Here was a wonder second only to the Greatest Wonder of all, and of which it was but an enacted parable, that mystery and marvel of the age that now is and that which is to come, the calling out from among the children of men of "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, who should show forth the praises of Him who had called them out of darkness into His marvellous light, which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God, which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2. 9), "to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known *by the Church* the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph. 3. 10).

### **The Wonder of the Church.**

Here, then, is God's greatest wonder: a people "called out" from every nation and kindred and people and tongue,

redeemed from all iniquity, purified unto Christ, a peculiar people zealous of good works (Titus 2. 14), a multitude that no man can number, without a visible king, without an earthly country, destitute of all the resources of this world, hated and opposed by all the powers of the world, yet growing and spreading and fulfilling their high and holy mission on earth. In the world, but not of it, and radically different from all about them. A people of paradox: their poorest, their richest; their humblest, their greatest; their weakest, their strongest; their simplest, their wisest; "as deceivers and yet true; as unknown and yet well known; as dying, and behold they live; as chastened and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things" (2 Cor. 6. 10), of whom it is written that the Lord of Glory Himself "is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Heb. 2. 11), and who Himself gave them their name for all time, "MY CHURCH" (Matt. 16. 18).



## CHAPTER II.

**How the Church Began.**

It began where all wonders have their birth—in the heart of God. God thought it before the world was. It began where light began—in the mind of God. “God said, Let there be light; and there was light” (Gen. 1. 3). So the Church of God was conceived in the mind and purpose of God ere ever man existed, and the host of the redeemed were “chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1. 4).

This was the mystery *hidden* from ages and generations (Col. 1. 26), so perfectly hidden that it had never entered into the heart of men. The world's philosophers have had many Utopian dreams, but nothing remotely resembling this great Wonder. The secret was sealed in the heart of God until the fulness of time when He Himself should reveal it. “But when the fulness of time was come God sent forth His Son” (Gal. 4. 4) that the wonder of wonders might be accomplished.

When some mighty edifice of men that shall stand the test of time is contemplated, great attention is paid to the foundations. For many months work was in progress on the site of the new Bank of England, London, many thousands of pounds were expended, and an army of workmen was busily engaged under the direction of the architect. But nothing appeared, the work was underground, the foundations of a palatial building were being well and truly laid.

So it was with the Church of God, that holy Temple in the Lord which was to be. Much must be done before the Church appeared. The foundation must be laid so well that when the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew upon that house it should not fall, because it should be "founded upon a rock" (Matt. 7. 25).

It was a fitting foundation, for it was a foundation of Wonder, no less a wonder than the Christ the Son of the Living God. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God . . . upon this rock will I

## 10      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

build My Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16. 18). Consider

### **THE SEVENFOLD WONDER**

of this rock foundation.

1. It began in

#### **The Wonder of Bethlehem.**

The Son of God in a manger. The Salvation of God an Infant in the arms of Simeon. A pure and holy Babe. A perfect Bud unfolding to a perfect flower, a snow-white lily among briars and thorns. Holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners.

2. Then followed

#### **The Wonder of Jordan.**

Jesus full of the Holy Ghost. "The Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting upon Him" (Matt. 3. 16). God the Son, indwelt by God the Spirit, beloved of God the Father. Henceforth He could say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor" (Luke

4. 18). A foreshadowing of the day when that same Holy Spirit should descend once more (but then in semblance of fire) upon His newly formed Body the Church, that thenceforth it might be a "habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2. 22).

3. Next came

### **The Wonder of the Mount,**

where for a brief moment the glory of His Deity shone forth, and the three saw Him refulgent, as He afterwards appeared to John at Patmos, walking in the midst of the Candlesticks. Here was He who should be the Lord of the Church, worshipped and witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets.

4. But the Central wonder of the sevenfold wonders of the Son of God was

### **The Wonder of Calvary.**

"Behold the amazing sight,  
The Saviour lifted high;  
The Son of God, His soul's delight,  
Expire in agony!"

It was to be a blood-bought Church.

## 12      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

“Redeemed not with corruptible things ...but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1. 18). It was to be a blood-washed Church, “a multitude that no man can number, who had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7, 9, 14). It was to be a holy Church, “sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once for all” (Heb. 10. 10). How marvellous that before it had any being “Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5. 25). And then the grave closed upon Him and all seemed in vain. “We trusted that it had been He that should have redeemed Israel” (Luke 24. 22), but hope had died. “The King of the Jews” was crucified, and His followers scattered. He had been wonderful, but was He not dead, and is not “a live dog better than a dead lion” (Eccles. 9. 4)?

Imagine a farmer ruefully contemplating his frozen, snow-clad fields, into which he had sown his seed. Could anything seem more hopeless and void of promise? But spring arrives, and the

perennial miracle takes place. First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.

5. And so it was with Christ; the "corn of wheat" had fallen into the ground and died, but, behold,

### **The Wonder of the Empty Tomb.**

Who ever heard of such a thing? An empty house, an empty chair, perhaps, but never an empty *tomb*! Tombs are not taken on a lease of years. Yet that tomb in the garden was the forerunner of millions. He who left it was the "first begotten from the dead" (Rev. 1. 5). All who love His Appearing will leave their graves one blessed Day to meet Him in the air.

Up from the grave He arose! He who was slain, "because He made Himself God" was "declared to be the Son of God, with power by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1. 4). He left the tomb to be the Lord of His people, the King of the Heavenly Kingdom, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, the Head of His Body the Church.

## 14      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

6. "First the blade, then the ear."  
After the empty tomb followed

### **The Wonder of Olivet.**

He who shared with Moses the silence of the tomb, shared with Elijah the glory of the Rapture. "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in" (Psa. 24. 9, 10). What a triumphant entry into Glory as leading a multitude of captives, having purged our sins He sat down on the right Hand of the Majesty on High! How all Heaven rang with His praises, singing, "THOU ART WORTHY!"

7. And now all has been accomplished, the foundation has been laid, the King is in glory. He has received gifts for men and everything is in readiness for the "full corn in the ear,"

### **The Wonder of Pentecost,**

for ever memorable as the Great Birthday of the Church of God.

CHAPTER III.

## How the Church Took Shape.

THERE was no Church on earth when Christ left the world. He ascended to the Father, having completed the work that had been given Him to do, but He left no Church behind Him. He had said: "On this Rock will I build My Church" (Matt. 16. 18), but He had not yet built it.

Truly the foundation had been laid, but where was the building? The Redemption Price had been paid which should provide the Silver Sockets of the Tabernacle, but where were the boards which, fitly framed together, should form a habitation of God through the Spirit? The wood and the coals were in order, but where was the fire?

Well might the Devil exult and the world scoff at the apparent failure of Calvary. True, the tomb was empty, but there was nothing more. The disciples, who had during His lifetime,



## 16      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

cast out devils in His name, did so no longer, but were seemingly scattered or in hiding "for fear of the Jews." To the eyes of men and even to the minds of many who had loved Him, it all seemed a complete fiasco, void of hope for the future.

NOT TO ALL. Somewhere in Jerusalem, possibly within the Temple area itself, were gathered a believing company, a hundred and twenty in number. They had seen the Lord, and had heard His behest to "wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1. 4), and for this they were waiting and praying. They were of one mind and of one faith, but they were no Church, for they were not one Body. There was nothing to unite them into One Entity. They were

### **A Company, but not a Church,**

just as to-day there may be associations and religious institutions, bound together by rules and creeds and common aims, which yet bear no more likeness to a Church of God than an automaton does to a man. The distinction is that which marks an organisation from an

organism, the one being an assemblage of units in association, yet having no essential and inseparable relation to each other (as the mechanical parts of a machine); the other being one inseparable whole having parts mutually essential one to another as a body having many members.

Imagine a great cauldron containing 120 ingots of gold of varying size and shape. All are in association, and indeed in close contact one to another in the cauldron. Yet none is essential to the rest and any can be removed without effect upon the remainder. But bring the cauldron to the fire, and mark the miracle wrought by the flame. All are for ever fused and welded into an inseparable mass, each becoming a permanent and essential part of one great whole. It is this which took place on the day of Pentecost.

Behold an unparalleled episode in history—

### **The Church's Wonderful First Day**

—a “sudden” event (Acts 2. 2), as  
B

## 18      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

sudden as are all the crises of God in His dealings with men; as sudden as Bethlehem (Luke 2. 13); as sudden as His promised Return (Mal. 3. 1); as sudden as the coming Rapture (1 Cor. 15. 52); as sudden as the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5. 3). A praying company of men and women were gathered "with one accord in one place" (Acts 2. 1). The Heavens that had received their Lord were silent above them, when "suddenly" the silence was broken by "the sound of a rushing mighty wind which filled all the house where they were sitting, and there appeared unto them tongues like as of fire parting among them, and it sat upon each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost," and lo! the Church of God existed!

This was that which had been prophesied by the prophet Joel, "I will pour out My Spirit... Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." The greatest wonder of all had come to pass. God

had made for Himself a dwelling-place among men, "An habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2. 22). A Temple of the Holy Ghost. A Church of Spirit-filled men, through whom should be accomplished "the Acts of the Holy Ghost."

On that one day that gathered company had been transformed for ever from a group of disciples of Jesus into

### **The Body of Christ on Earth,**

a new creation, something radically different from every association of men hitherto conceived of. Not a religious society. Not a brotherhood of good men. Not a mutual improvement association. But God's elect People, sanctified in Christ Jesus, whose names are written in Heaven. God's Church, of which every spiritual man is a member, and in which no unregenerate man has any part or lot, though he accepts a "Christian" creed, or is a member of a "Christian" community.

It is no wonder that the multitudes came together and were confounded,

## 20      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

saying, "What meaneth this?" It was the most amazing event in the history of the world, and was destined to effect a far greater change upon the human race and the course of future history than anything that had happened before or has happened since. Its effect was instantaneous and electric.

The scene at Babel was reversed; the nations of the world, whose tongues had been "confounded" (Gen. 11. 7), were now confounded to find themselves brought once again to a common understanding and a new tie being formed which was ultimately to bring together "a multitude which no man could number of all nations, and kindred, and people, and *tongues*," who should cry with a loud voice, "Salvation to our God" (Rev. 7. 10).

The scene at Sinai was reversed. In place of the terrors of the broken Law, before which 3000 had perished, was the blessing of the Smitten Rock and out-poured Spirit under which 3000 were born to eternal life. Here was a Pentecost indeed. Christ's great harvest home whereat He saw of the travail of

His soul and was satisfied. Here was the Church He was to build upon the Rock, against which the very gates of Hell should not prevail. A Spirit-filled Church. Filled with the Spirit of Power and therefore invincible. Filled with the Spirit of Wisdom displayed in feeble men that all the glory might be of God.

Let us examine this wondrous New Thing that God had created, and see

### **What it was Like.**

The first thing that strikes us is its utter simplicity and the absence of many things men consider essential to the existence of a religious community. For example, it was innocent of any form of Constitution with Rules or Creeds. It had no Priests or prayer book, nor any "place of worship." It knew nothing of vestments or ceremonial, nor the observance of "days and months, and times, and years." All these things did not exist in the Church of Apostolic days.

In fact this was its characteristic

## 22      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

distinction from the religion of the Jews. The latter (the only God-given "religion" in the stricter sense of the word) was to Christianity as a *fold* is to a *flock*: the one a nation enclosed by a wall of ordinances, the other a company of "sheep" called out from the Jewish fold and Gentile wilderness around One Shepherd, with no other bond of union than a common life in and devotion to that Shepherd, and no other rule than to follow Him (see John 10. 16, R. v.).

### **Who were its Members.**

The first were Jews and proselytes from every nation under Heaven, many of them "devout men," others perhaps from among the ribald "mockers," even "as many as the Lord should call" (Acts 2. 39), "the Lord adding daily to the Church such as were being saved" (Acts 2. 47). Then a great company of the priests were obedient unto the faith (Acts 6. 7), and multitudes both of men and women were added to the Lord (Acts 5. 14). After that came the Gentile believers to swell the host, rich

and poor, ignorant and learned ; but all of one heart and one mind.

### **What Did these Converts ?**

A very explicit account is given in Acts 2. 37-47.

1. **THEY REPENTED.** Pricked in their hearts, they inquired eagerly the way of salvation, and were told to repent. This they did whole-heartedly then and there, as evidenced by a complete and radical change of mind toward Him whom they had but a few weeks since crucified and slain with execration and hatred.

2. **THEY GLADLY RECEIVED THE WORD.** They believed the Good News of remission of sin in the Name of Jesus Christ, and of His glorious exaltation by the Right Hand of God to be a Prince and a Saviour.

3. **THEY WERE BAPTISED.** What a baptising that was ! Thousands of them. How the City must have been moved, and what division there must have been in families, two against three, and three against two, and a man's foes they of his



## 24      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

own household, as the Lord had said (Matt. 10. 36).

4. THEY CONTINUED STEADFAST. As they had received Christ Jesus the Lord, so they walked in Him (Col. 2. 6) with purpose of heart, cleaving unto the Lord (Acts 11. 23). And this steadfastness was displayed in four directions.

(a) IN THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES. They were not blown about by every wind of doctrine. They had embraced a very unpopular and highly dangerous truth, and there was every incentive to waver, but they had not followed cunningly devised fables; it was truth, wonderful Truth, and it held them steadfast.

(b) IN FELLOWSHIP. They found themselves in a goodly fellowship, a bond of brotherly love such as had never bound men together before, and they continued steadfast in it.

(c) IN BREAKING OF BREAD. Here was something new indeed. As the prodigal son's return to his father's house was celebrated at a joyful supper table, where they "began to be merry,"

so it was now. From house to house they gathered with gladness and singleness of heart, and broke bread—their Lord's own token—in memory of Him whom they had come to love, showing forth His death until He should come. And they continued steadfast in it.

(d) IN PRAYERS. The new born life expressed itself in praying, as it ever does. Oh, those first prayer meetings of the Church of God! How would they compare with some to-day? Of how many a new convert was it said, as of Saul of Tarsus, "Behold he prayeth;" and they continued steadfast in it. How they prayed and prayed! What music must it have been in the ears of their risen Lord in Glory!

Nor was this all they did. There was something further of surpassing significance recorded of them.

5. THEY WERE TOGETHER AND HAD ALL THINGS COMMON. They were just a huge united family of brothers, with common interests and common concerns. Not that they did not have individual possessions and in some instances re-

## 26      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

tained them ; but that “none *said* that aught of the things he possessed was *his own*” (Acts 4. 32). Self-seeking had faded before brotherly kindness, so that there was “not any among them that lacked” (Acts 4. 34).

There is nothing like the Gospel to loosen the purse strings, and there are certainly no givers on earth to be compared with Christians. It began spontaneously when the Church began, and has continued ever since.

Such is the picture of the Church of God in its first and earliest manifestation. Is the picture true of the Church to-day ?

CHAPTER IV.

**How the Church was  
Opposed.**

GOD's greatest wonder has now taken shape. His Church is a Church in being, and we have seen something of its nature in its earliest manifestation during those first Pentecostal days.

What room was there for it in the world? How was it received by the men to whom it came? It was "a new thing," and as such must certainly provoke comment and attract attention. Would its reception be friendly or hostile? Was it a welcome or a war that awaited the new-born Church? It was not long before the answer to these questions was made abundantly manifest. The people of God speedily found themselves accorded the same treatment at the hands of men as their Lord had endured before them. As He was, so were they in this world. As there was no room for the new-born Babe in the inn, so there was no room for His Church. Its appearance

## 28      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

was the signal for general hostility. Position begat opposition, and the saints found themselves in the enemy's country with a declaration of war from the very first day. They were

### **A Church Militant from the Beginning,**

and have continued so ever since.

This indeed was inevitable, "for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, and what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6. 14). There could be no compromise, no truce, no armistice, but, on the contrary, on both sides it was tacitly recognised as war *à outrance*.

Yet it was entirely unprovoked. There was nothing in the Christians themselves calculated to provoke hostility. On the contrary, "they had favour with all the people" (Acts 2. 47).

They were AN UNOFFENSIVE PEOPLE. It is recorded of them that "they lived peaceably and would not assert their rights." They turned the other cheek, they gave the cloak also. It takes two to

quarrel. Who could quarrel with such peace-makers?

They were, moreover, A LOVING PEOPLE. It was their outstanding feature. "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13. 35).

They were a CHRIST-LIKE PEOPLE. "They took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4. 13), for their character and conduct resembled His. They loved their enemies as He had done. Who could forget Stephen's dying prayer: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!" (Acts 7. 60).

They were A TOLERANT PEOPLE. They were not iconoclasts, they were not destructive of other religions. They were even found worshipping in the Temple in the early days. Nothing could be less provocative than their behaviour with regard to the creeds of those around them. They were non-contentious against such matters, though they contended earnestly for the Truth. Yet "the Way" they followed was hated and

## 30      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

opposed and everywhere spoken against.  
Why was this? It was because

### **Their Very Existence was a Challenge.**

Truth and error cannot exist together, and while they were not concerned to refute error, but to proclaim the Truth, that Truth in itself was the greatest enemy to all the lies of the Devil that held men in bondage all around them. Wherever Jesus had gone the demons had cried out and fled before Him, and it was the same with the Church as it went forth proclaiming His Gospel.

It is the same to-day, and it is as true individually as collectively. "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3. 12). If our life is truly for God it will certainly arouse hostility. The only way to escape this (and, alas, one commonly adopted!) is to compromise.

But the early Church was in no mood for compromise, and accordingly the opposition was bitter.

It arose mainly in two directions;

### 1. Opposition from the Priests.

Religion has always been the greatest enemy of Christianity. It was the priests who "crucified and slew the Lord of Glory," and it was the priests who first attacked His Church. And so it has ever been throughout the centuries. Official religion has ever been the foe to the Church of God. The priests were the recognised religious authorities, they were really religious, they were perfectly sincere, and they were full of zeal, and yet they persecuted the Church and were found fighting against God. This is because religion, and sincerity, and zeal may yet be utterly wrong, and, if wrong, are all the more dangerous from their very reality.

Their zeal led them to hatred, to injustice, to cruelty, and even to murder. This is ever the penalty of light refused. "The God of this world hath blinded the eyes of those that believe not" (2 Cor. 4. 4), and such was their blindness that, like Saul of Tarsus, they verily thought that they "ought to do many things contrary to the Name of Jesus of Naza-



reth," which things they also did (Acts 26. 9). The greatest atrocities recorded in history have been committed by the official leaders of religion against the people of God.

## 2. Opposition from the Throne.

"The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ" (Acts 4. 26). "Herod stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the Church, and he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword" (Acts 12. 1).

Kings and governments have often persecuted their best citizens, and generally at the instigation of the priests, as in this case, "because he saw it pleased the Jews." Thus the infant Church found itself opposed by the whole force of religious and secular authority. What chance had it under such circumstances? *Indeed the opposition appeared to triumph.* It had been so at Calvary. The priests had wagged their heads in confident triumph at the spectacle of the bleeding, agonising Christ between two thieves.

So it was now. How foolish must Peter have looked as he was dragged through the streets like an apprehended criminal! What a poor, harried, helpless, broken creature must Stephen have appeared as the stones crushed out his life in the market place, and what a contrast to Saul of Tarsus in all his dignity as the official witness of the execution! What a pitiable sight was poor James' headless body as the weeping disciples bore it away for burial!

Yet appearances are deceptive.

### **Opposition Does Not Mean Defeat,**

nor do vaunted triumphs always spell victory. The Church had been born for conflict. "I came not to send peace, but a sword, for I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matt. 10. 34-36). Its enemies were soon to discover that the Church of God was a Wonder indeed in this that it was to all attack from

## 34      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

without invulnerable, invincible, irresistible!

Persecution but fostered zeal and devotion; scattering but spread the fire, and martyrdom was the seed which, falling into the ground and dying, brought forth an hundredfold!

But the Devil had other methods of attack. If opposition from without proved futile, he would try *opposition from within*. Would the Church prove immune from attack within its gates? Dissension, Discontent, Deception, Duplicity, and Disloyalty within were far more formidable foes than priests and kings without. Suppose "murmuring" in place of "rejoicing;" suppose "envying" instead of "loving;" suppose the eye of faith could be diverted from Christ to self-interest—what then? And so the attack was launched. How frail and vulnerable was the Church when opposed from within, though impregnable from without!

### **The Attack was Threefold.**

The three chief enemies of unity

throughout the ages made their appearance in succession.

1. **DUPPLICITY** (Acts 5). A deviation from "simplicity and godly sincerity." God's first requirement of His people is absolute honesty. Thou requirest truth in the inward parts" (Psa. 51. 6). Ananias and Sapphira sought to appear other than they really were. It was an offence against *Light*. If this prevailed in the Church the result would have been what God hates most—a mixture. A Church of all sorts—iron and clay. God, therefore, visited its first appearance with a signal mark of His displeasure, and gave His first solemn lesson to His Church, that it must at all costs be holy, full of light, having no part dark. The effect was most salutary. "Great fear came upon the Church, and of the rest durst no man join himself to them" (Acts 5. 11-13).

2. **DISSENSION** (Acts 6). Here was an offence against *Love*. The Grecians and Hebrews at loggerheads over their share of the Church funds! Self-interest is contrary to the very existence of the

## 36      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

Church, and if this prevailed the result would have been division in place of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. How wisely the apostles met the crisis! They selected men to oversee the distribution, and that the Grecians should have no further cause of complaint they were careful to choose the Deacons from among the Greeks themselves! Thus the Enemy was defeated in this attack also.

3. DISTINCTION. (Acts 8). Here was the introduction of perhaps the worst of all the troubles that has afflicted the Church of God throughout its history—the love of power. Simon, the Sorcerer, saying: “Give me this power.” “Ambition, love of pre-eminence, the desire to lord it over the Church. It is an offence against *Lowliness*. If this prevailed the result would have been the setting up of a clerical caste in the Church of God, exercising “power” and domination over the flock, utterly foreign to the purpose and teaching of the Lord Himself. “Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your ser-

vant" (Matt. 20. 27). "And whosoever of you will be the chiefest shall be servant of all."

Thus it was at the very beginning, and so it has been since. The Church of God invulnerable from without, but, alas, so open to attack from within, yet graciously preserved, so that whenever the enemy has come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord has lifted up a standard against him, and so having received help of God it has continued unto this day.

## CHAPTER V.

**How the Church Triumphed.**

THE triumph of the Church of God in face of its enemies is one of the greatest miracles of history. Logically it should have been extinct in the first generation. The forces arrayed against it were overwhelming, while its natural resources were negligible. It had none of the elements that are relied upon for success among men. It had neither wealth, nor influence, nor patronage. Its members were for the most part unlearned men. Its numbers were few and its cause unpopular. It was reckoned unpatriotic by the Jews and subversive of discipline by the Romans. To espouse it was highly dangerous and often meant the loss of all things.

And yet it triumphed in face of hatred, persecution, prison, and death.

**It Triumphed in Thousands.**

Whole districts turned to the Lord. Samaria (of all places) with one accord gave heed to the message of the Gospel

from the lips of Jews who hitherto had had no dealings with Samaritans.

What a triumph over racial hatred, and what an irresistible demonstration of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "But I say unto you, love your enemies, do good to them that hate you" (Matt. 5. 44). What thrilling times those must have been as "believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (Acts 5. 14), and as "there came also a multitude out of the cities round about Jerusalem" (Acts 5. 16); so much as to provoke the authorities to alarm and envy, "doubting whereunto this would grow." Thousands upon thousands flocked to the Name of Jesus, so that "the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly" (Acts 6. 7). And most wonderful triumph of all, "a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6. 7).

Is there any class of men in all history more hidebound by tradition, more impervious to influence by reason of their training, and more hedged about by



pride of caste than were the priests of Judaism? In any religion (including that of Christendom) the priest is by virtue of his official position permanently pledged to the tenets of his faith which he has sworn to uphold, and upon loyalty to which his very existence will often depend. Yet even here, and here most of all, the wonder triumphed, sweeping away as a flood all the barriers which prejudice, prudence, or pride would oppose to its onward course.

Think of that great company of priests abandoning the service of the Temple in the order of their courses, renouncing their share of the Temple offerings and gladly suffering the loss of all things for the sake of the Name. Think of the bitter hatred, the reviling, the persecution, and peril to life itself that must have been their lot, and marvel at the triumph of the Gospel.

### **It Triumphed Continually.**

It was not merely the wave of emotion at Pentecost, as at some occasion of religious revival known to modern times,

which swept men off their feet and then died down. No, "the Lord added *daily* to the Church such as were being saved" (Acts 2. 47, R. V.).

### **The Triumph was Lasting.**

Its effect upon those who received the Word was a permanent one. Here was no passing enthusiasm. Those who received the Word "clave unto the Lord," and displayed the grace of God in newness of life.

This was indeed the test that Gamaliel applied to the infant Church, confident in his own mind that time would prove its undoing, as it had other movements before it. "If this council or this work be of man it will come to naught, BUT if it be of God ye cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found even to fight against God" (Acts 5. 38). The Church took up the challenge and emerged triumphant.

### **The Triumph was General.**

All sorts and conditions of men were reached. Not merely the ignorant and

## 42      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

emotional, but the cultured and educated classes. Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, Barbarians, Romans, slaves, masters, rulers, beggars, strong men, weak women and little children.

The same message triumphed equally with minds and hearts of every diversity and under every variety of circumstance. It was a Gospel for all. It was a Catholic Church in the truest sense from the first day.

### **The Triumph was Glorious.**

Every day fresh stories of grace, marvellous and thrilling conversions, men falling down in the midst of the Church and worshipping God and reporting that God was in their company of a truth (1 Cor. 14. 25).

There were no doubts as to sudden conversion in those days; it was a matter of daily occurrence. How glorious it must have been to live in Jerusalem in A.D. 40!

Could the story be fully recorded, I doubt if the whole world would contain the books that should be written. There

is room in Heaven, however, and there the records are complete. We shall read them at leisure no doubt in the glad eternity to come.

But for our learning and encouragement the Holy Ghost has selected and placed on permanent record

### **THREE TYPICAL TRIUMPHS.**

Three instances of sudden conversion, each representative without doubt of many others of which no earthly record is preserved. In each case the most minute details are given, and the story is told in so masterly a manner that the character lives before us for all time, and we are enabled in a remarkable degree to enter into his spiritual experience and compare it with our own.

All three were men educated, influential, moral, and religious. Each was unexpectedly converted, and each was what would be considered to-day an unlikely case. Each was saved by a remarkable and direct intervention of God, though in one case the intervention was not perceived until after the event

They were three very different men. One brought up in darkest Africa, amid all the degrading influences of heathen surroundings. Another a high class Jew, saturated with racial prejudices and fanatical hatred of the Name of Jesus. While the last was a Roman soldier, stern and hard and cynical by training and profession.

The stories are told in three consecutive chapters (Acts 8, 9, and 10), and form together an epic of the grace of God. It is further interesting and significant to note that though each was a sudden conversion in every case the ground had been prepared by God beforehand for a longer or shorter period. Indeed nothing emerges more clearly from these stories of salvation than the sovereign grace of God. Grace victoriously triumphant under the strangest circumstances.

Consider

### **The Story of the Eunuch**

(Acts 8). A man by birth as far removed from Gospel influence as could well be

conceived. Probably a proselyte to Judaism, attending at Jerusalem for the occasion of the Feast of Pentecost. Frankly a seeker after God, yet disappointed in his search, for he had found an empty Temple, from which the glory had departed, and we meet him first as A MAN RETURNING, travelling back to the darkness of his native land, each step taking him farther from hope and God.

But we see him also as A MAN READING. His attention has been directed to the Word of God, and he is studying the "Gospel according to Isaiah" with earnest though puzzled mind. He is groping after the light, and he is now seeking in the right direction, for "the entrance of Thy Words giveth light" (Psa. 119. 130). How encouraging to every seeking soul is the fact that God was watching his course with tender solicitude, and sent him at the very crucial moment of his search a teacher who could "preach unto him Jesus."

What wonder then that the story closes with a picture of him as A MAN REJOICING! Believing with all his heart,

baptised before his wondering retinue, and going on his way *alone*, yet full of joyful confidence. What a triumph! One day history may reveal the part played by this first African convert in the formation of that great Church that spread and flourished in the first centuries throughout North Africa.

### **The Conversion of Saul**

(Acts 9) may be said to constitute in its far-reaching results the greatest individual victory in the history of the Church of God. It was of a highly dramatic character. The details (thrice recounted in Scripture) are too familiar to call for repetition here. It was a case of grace triumphing over the most violent antipathy and determined opposition of the mind and will. No better description could be given of the event than that employed by Paul himself when he declared that he was "apprehended by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3. 12). It was an arrest upon the highway, an arrest effected by the Lord Himself without human intervention.

There had no doubt been some preparation for the crisis, as is ever the case; a man's conversion, however sudden and unexpected, being but the last link in a chain of divinely guided circumstances more or less clearly discernible in retrospect. Stephen's dying prayer and the sight of his face, "as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6. 15), must have been a powerful factor in the preparation of Paul's mind and heart for what was to follow. And then his visits to the houses of the believers, his first introduction to that most powerful demonstration of Christianity, a Christian home, albeit for the purpose of haling men and women and committing them to prison (Acts 8. 3), who can measure the effects of such an experience upon the persecutor? The united testimony of all who were brought before him, their joy and peace in believing, their non-retaliation, and, above all, their prayer for those that despitefully used them, all combined to prepare the way for the crisis awaiting him outside Damascus.

The story of Saul's conversion can



perhaps best be summarised in his own words before King Agrippa. Seven things he said concerning his previous character, his conversion, and his after conduct. They are recorded in Acts 26: "I lived" (v. 5), "I thought" (v. 9), "I saw" (v. 13), "I heard" (v. 14), "I said" (v. 15), "I was not disobedient" (v. 19), and "I continue unto this day" (v. 22).

It was at once a conversion and a commission. He was saved and sent at the same time. It was bewilderingly sudden. The exclusive Pharisee of a few moments before found himself appointed in a flash a minister and a witness to the Gentiles, whom all his life he had held in contempt and abhorrence, and from that time onward he lived in daily peril from his own countrymen, and the devoted servant of the people for whom he had the greatest natural antipathy, while the Name he most hated had become to him the Name that is above every name for ever in his heart and on his lips. Such was the triumph of the persecuted Church over its arch-persecutor.

With

**Cornelius, the Gentile Centurion**

God's methods were again different. To the Eunuch God sent a man, to Saul Christ appeared Himself, while to Cornelius God sent an angel. Thus God has many varying ways and avenues by which to reach and capture the City of Mansoul.

Cornelius was an illustration of the conversion of a good man. For he was a devout man and one that feared God with all his house, and gave much alms to the people and prayed to God always (Acts 10 2). And that before he was converted! Yet with all this he needed to hear "words whereby he might be saved" (Acts 11. 14), as much as the vilest sinner. For while as Peter testified, "God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him" (Acts 10. 34, 35), yet it is only through Jesus Christ that peace is proclaimed, and it is through His Name alone that "whosoever believeth in Him

## 50      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10. 43). Cornelius knew nothing of forgiveness or peace. He was a moral but not a spiritual man, and the Church is composed of spiritual people and no others.

But in his case there was no conflict, but an eager readiness to hear and receive the Message. There was a conflict truly, but it was with the messenger who was to bring the Message. Here was the battle and here the triumph of grace. For Peter had *never* (oh, with what self-complacency he said it!) eaten anything that is common or unclean (Acts 10. 14). Poor Peter, how prone he was to contradict the Lord, and how hardly he learned his lessons. Yet the lesson was learned, the victory was gained, and the Holy Ghost fell upon the Gentile centurion and his household, as on Peter and his brethren at the beginning.

Thus the wonder triumphed, and thus it triumphs still. "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord" (Zech. 4. 6).

## CHAPTER VI.

**How the Church Spread  
and Prospered.**

LOOKING back as we can over the Church's age-long history, nothing is more astonishing than the manner in which it has grown from a grain of mustard seed, "the least of all seeds," until it has become "the greatest of herbs" (Matt. 13. 32). Yet equally astonishing is the fact that another and a hostile growth inimical to the Church has sprung up alongside and spread continuously and in competition with it. Never was a parable more completely fulfilled in history than that in which the words were spoken, "Let both *grow* together" (v. 30). Truly the infant Church grew, and as in all growth that of the early days was most apparent and rapid.

Indeed, if the Church had continued to increase in the same proportion as it began, the whole world would have been evangelised in the first centuries, for it

## 52      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

spread from that first company in Jerusalem—some 120 praying souls—to 3000 at Pentecost, rapidly increasing in the first weeks to 5000. Then Judea heard the Word, all the towns and villages where the Saviour had walked and talked, and in each of which there dwelt living witnesses to His healing power: blind men who saw, lame men who walked, dumb who spake, devil-possessed clothed and in their right minds, lepers who had been cleansed, and even dead who had been brought back to life—these were more than ready for the glad tidings which came to them from the lips of Spirit-filled men of that same Saviour risen from the dead.

It was as a match to a well-laid fire. The response was immediate and widespread. Samaria gladly received the Word, and “there was great joy in that city” (Acts 8. 8). There those who “had heard Him themselves and knew that this was the Christ the Saviour of the world,” triumphantly acclaimed Him the same in His resurrection glory. And so to the uttermost parts of the earth,

## I. HOW IT SPREAD.

How came it to spread so fast?

### **The Enemy Spread It.**

They blew upon the flames to blow them *out*, but only succeeded in blowing them up. The fire they scattered set fresh fires wherever the sparks fell. The blood of the martyrs proved to be the seed of the Church. The most vital and effective way in which to serve a cause is to die for it. The axe that severed James' head proved to be an axe laid to the root of the tree of Judaism. The greatest propagandists of the Gospel have ever been its enemies who have sought to stay its progress. Few people nowadays read the sermons of Ridley and Latimer, yet the candle they lit in dying shines vividly in the national consciousness to-day.

### **The Lord Spread It.**

"The hand of the Lord was with them confirming the Word, with signs following" (Mark 16. 20). The enemy locked them within prison doors with all

safety. The Lord opened the doors, and, lo! the men were preaching in the Temple! Their chief champion was arrested on the highway by the direct intervention of the Lord Himself, and transformed into "a chosen vessel to bear His Name." Nothing is more manifest than the finger of God directing and controlling the course of events in those first critical days.

### **The Apostles Spread It.**

Peter opened the door with those glorious keys with which Christ honoured this rock-like man (once shifting as the sand), first to the Jews, "men and brethren, children of the seed of Abraham," and then to the Gentile company gathered in Cornelius' house. PAUL took up the theme. PHILIP, the evangelist, assisted by his four daughters ("the Lord gave the Word: great was the company of the *women* that published it," Psa. 68. 11, R.V.). BARNABAS, SILAS, APOLLOS, and many another valiant for the truth, the record of whose "Acts" is registered in the Acts of the

Apostles written in Heaven. Who does not long to scan the records in glory of the doings of JOHN, the beloved disciple, of ANDREW, of PHILIP, and THOMAS, and others of that goodly company in those early days. One and all they joined in spreading it.

### **The Church Spread Itself.**

They went everywhere preaching the Word. The rank and file took up the task. Every believer became a witness and a soul-winner. The truth in this way penetrated every walk of life, for there were witnesses in the market place, in the home, and even in Cæsar's household.

This, then, was how it spread. If it is asked

## **II. WHY IT SPREAD,**

the answer is equally clear.

### **It Spread Because It Was True.**

It was genuine, a real thing. Forgiveness, salvation, victory, love, joy, peace, assurance, communion, these things were and are real. They were no



## 56      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

mere creeds, but vital experiences of which those who preached them had tasted and were then in present enjoyment.

There is no business axiom more sure than this, that it pays to advertise *a genuine article*.

### **It Spread Because It Was Alive.**

It was endued with "the power of an endless life" (Heb. 7. 16).

There is something more than surprising in the force of a living thing. Who has not beheld with wonder some great castle wall split in twain by the unaided efforts of an ivy vine, which has forced its way by sheer persistency through some small crevice, and in course of years triumphed over the opposing mass of masonry. In the new-born Church was new-born life, and the gates of Hell could not prevail against it.

### **It Spread Because of Zeal and Devotion.**

Even a bad cause zealously served will prosper for a time. This was a cause

worth living for, and its followers were men *who lived for nothing else*. Of how many is this true to-day? Christian service was not a thing to be pursued in one's leisure time in the early days. It took first place: "For me to live is Christ," said Paul. If a man was converted his family and friends knew it, and the matter became a vital issue for them all. A man *running* in the street attracts attention and comment. The same man walking would provoke no remark. It is when, like David, we "run in the way of His commandments" (Psa. 119. 32) that people take notice. The professing Church has settled down in its middle life to an easy saunter, and no one is provoked.

### **It Spread Because of Heroic Self-sacrifice.**

Its members discovered that it was a cause not only worth living for, but abundantly worth dying for. Indeed, it is the only thing in the world worth that to-day. Men will pay a big price for many things, but there is nothing for

which a man will lay down his life of choice.

Yet for Christ's sake they suffered the loss of all things, and counted not their lives dear unto themselves. This is what is lacking in professing believers of modern times. The next great Revival will be ushered in as every revival has been, by men who are content to be as "the off-scouring of the earth" for Christ's sake. We are most of us too comfortable for a Pentecost. Perhaps most of all

### **It Spread Because of the Spirit of Love.**

There had never existed before a society bound together by mutual love. It was a most arresting phenomenon, and a most magnetic one. There was no doubt these people loved one another with a love that knew no limits, and sprang from no earthly source. Moreover, they did not only love one another, they loved sinners and longed to win them for Christ. And, most wonderful of all, they loved their enemies, and prayed for

those that despitefully used them. And this accomplished more than all their zeal and self-sacrifice. Men could oppose zeal with counter-zeal, but what could prevail against meekness and lowliness, kindness and love? It was a new thing, and by it they proved more than conquerors. Thus, the infant Church spread in all directions and broke all bounds.

### **At First—A Jewish Church.**

At first it was a Jewish Church, in outlook as well as membership, and it needed a Divine revelation to pave the way for the preaching of the glad tidings to the "sinners of the Gentiles."

"What God has cleansed, that call not thou common or unclean" (Acts 10. 15). So the good news came at length to the "other sheep" away in the Gentile wilderness. The Good Shepherd had visited the Jewish fold and, calling His own sheep by name, had led them out, never thereafter to be reckoned Jews, nor folded again in the "wall of partition," and from the wilderness the

same Good Shepherd was bringing His "other sheep" (shepherdless hitherto), that they might hear His voice and become with the sheep called from the fold, "One *flock* with one Shepherd" (John 10. 16, R. V.). Henceforth the enfolding wall was gone, laws and ordinances had passed away; the flock knew but one law—the law of love to the Shepherd and to one another. They gathered round Him and "did not want." He made them lie down in green pastures. They sat down under His shadow with great delight. The day had not yet arrived when human prudence and caution should build up enfolding walls and seek to enclose the Church of God within them, "cutting" them thus into rival "sects" with competing interests and claims. How blessed and simple were those multitudinous companies in every town and village gathered (often in private houses) around the table of the Lord to worship Him in simplicity and godly sincerity.

### **Gentiles and a Crisis.**

Now the Gentile converts came throng-

ing in, and a crisis of the first magnitude arose. "Ye must be circumcised! Ye must keep the law of Moses!" cried the Judaisers, as they sought to "put a yoke on the necks of the disciples," a yoke which neither they themselves nor their fathers had been able to bear. Here was a crisis indeed. The whole future of the Church hung in the balance. Having begun in the Spirit, was it to be made perfect through the flesh? Was Christianity to be but another religion imposed on men? At the moment of peril that doughty champion of the Gospel of Grace, PAUL, stepped boldly into the breach, withstanding even Peter to the face, and giving place to those who would bring into bondage, no; not for an hour, "that the truth of the Gospel might continue" (Gal. 2. 11-15).

Men have always sought to make a religion of Christianity, and to bind living souls in dead grave clothes. *We are not a fold, but a flock.* We have not a dead creed, but a living Christ. The Church is not an organisation, but

an *organism*, a living body fitly joined together, filled with the Spirit of God, and controlled by its Head in Heaven.

### **The Triumph Phenomenal.**

The battle was fought, and the victory was won, and thenceforth though the Judaisers continued to oppose and even persecute, the Church, free and unfettered, spread and prospered throughout the world of the Roman Empire, until it bade fair to break all bounds and triumph universally. Its success was indeed phenomenal.

In the year A.D. 110, PLINY wrote to the Emperor Trajan: "The number of the accused (Christians) is so great as to call for serious consultation. Many persons are informed against of every age and rank and of both sexes, and many more will be accused. Nor has the contagion of this superstition seized cities only, but the lesser towns also, and the open country..." He adds that for a time the Temples were almost forsaken, and the sacred rites abandoned, so that there were few purchasers of victims for the

heathen sacrifices. Such was the power of the Gospel, and such its magnetic force among sinners world wide.

Read TERTULLIAN'S testimony: "Who that beholds these things is not impelled to inquire into the cause, and who when he has inquired does not embrace Christianity? And who when he has embraced it does not himself wish to suffer for it?"

Let me close these papers with a contemporary picture from the pen of the heathen writer, PLINY, in another letter to the Emperor Trajan:

"The whole of the crime or error of the Christians lay in this. They were accustomed on a certain day to meet before daylight and to sing among themselves a hymn to Christ as a God; and to bind themselves by an oath not to commit any wickedness, not to be guilty of theft or robbery or adultery; never to falsify their word nor to deny a pledge committed to them when called upon to return it. When these things were performed, it was their custom to separate and then to come together again to a



64      GOD'S GREATEST WONDER

harmless meal, of which they partook  
in common without any disorder. ”

So we leave the story,

**An Epic of the Grace of God,**

with grateful hearts and a solemn sense  
of the heritage upon which we in our day  
and generation have entered, and the  
holy trust imposed on us to preserve in  
the Church of to-day the same three key-  
notes of its primitive forerunner: SIN-  
CERITY, SANCTITY, SIMPLICITY, till the  
blessed Day dawn in which God will  
display to principalities and powers in  
Heavenly places, “without spot or  
wrinkle, or any such thing, ” the Church,  
His Greatest Wonder of all.

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