

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

AND

SERMONS,

OF SOME OF THE

FIRST MINISTERS OF THE ASSOCIATE CHURCH IN AMERICA.

TO WHICH IS PREFIXED

A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION,

CONTAINING AN ACCOUNT OF THE RISE AND PROGRESS OF THE ASSOCIATE CHURCH FOR THE FIRST HALF CENTURY OF HER EXISTENCE IN THIS COUNTRY.

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# S E R M O N ,

BY THE REV. DAVID GOODWILLIE.

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“The mystery which hath been hid from ages, and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints.” (Col. i. 26.)

Every part of supernatural revelation is characteristic of its Divine Author. In nothing is it inferior to what might reasonably be expected, in the circumstances in which it was made. The change of man's condition from a happy state of innocence and integrity, in which he was made by God, to a wretched state of guilt and woe, must necessarily be attended with the most dreadful consequences. A proper apprehension of the sin and misery of this state, induced by the fall, must be alarming beyond expression. But to hear of a holy and happy change, which more than counterbalances our loss by the fall, is truly wonderful and astonishing, both in its nature and manner of revelation. It is, as the Apostle styles it, a “mystery,” which, though in a great measure it was hid from ages and generations, is now made manifest to the saints under a clearer dispensation of divine grace.

Through divine assistance we shall consider,

I. The gospel as a “mystery,” in its origin, nature, design and effects;

II. That it preserves the nature of a mystery in every period and degree of its revelation.

I. We are to consider the gospel as a “mystery.”

By a mystery, in scripture, is understood something of importance, which remains secret or unknown, in a great measure, or for some time. That is a mystery which in some respects lies hid or concealed from the common observation of mankind, so that they can have only dark and imperfect views of it, whether this darkness and imperfection arise from the nature of the thing itself, or from some obscurity in the

manner of revealing it. It is in this view that the apostle applies the word mystery, in this passage, to the word of God, the gospel of our salvation—"I am made a minister, to fulfill the word of God; even the mystery," &c. The gospel is mysterious in every point of view, whether we consider it as entirely hid till revealed by God, or so wonderful in itself, that it exceeds the comprehension of finite minds. When it is asserted that the gospel is a mystery, there is nothing advanced inconsistent either with the nature of things, or the method God must be allowed to take in the extraordinary dispensations of his grace. For the method of salvation through Christ, which never could have been discovered by finite wisdom, or accomplished by created power, must be allowed to be entirely above and beyond the compass of reason and nature, or in other words, it must be entirely supernatural. It can not therefore be objected to the plan of redemption through Christ, that it is unreasonable, because it is above the sphere of carnal reason.

The gospel is mysterious—

1. In its *origin*. It took its rise in the everlasting love of God. The apostle emphatically pronounces it "the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he hath purposed in himself." This love or good will of God passes all understanding, and is mysterious both in itself and in its gracious and blessed effects. The manner of its egress in the council of peace is entirely inexplicable. There first appeared "the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory." Its mysterious origin was hid from all eternity, and was not manifested until man had fallen.

2. In its *nature*. The gospel, strictly taken as the word implies, is the good news, or glad tidings of salvation. It is a declaration or manifestation of God in his gracious character, as the God of salvation. In it he invites and encourages sinners to partake of all those blessings which will render their happiness complete and their salvation eternal. But in order to this is necessary a competent knowledge of our fallen estate of sin and misery—of a future state of eternal happiness or woe—of the holy nature and gracious character and will of God—and of that redemption and salvation which is in Jesus Christ for sinners. But these things can be known only by divine and supernatural revelation. The gospel in its greatest extent comprehends the whole of God's word, and is an exhibition of the doctrines of grace, which are mysterious in their very nature, and therefore called the "mystery

of faith," because they are received only by faith, and the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," because they are discovered in God's kingdom of grace and glory, and the belief of them makes men heirs of that "kingdom which God hath promised to them who love him." It can not properly be said of what is called a mystery, that when it is revealed it is no longer mysterious. Thus the mystery of Christ's incarnation is revealed; but still the apostle affirms, "Great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh." The mystical union of Christ and his people is revealed; but still the apostle says, "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." The word "mystery" sometimes in scripture points out the truth and existence of things revealed, but which, as to the manner of their existence and degree of their essential perfection and excellence, are still unknown. Not wholly because human wisdom could never have discovered them, had not God graciously revealed them, but because even when they are revealed, human reason can not of itself apprehend nor comprehend them; and because those to whom they are made known, not only by the external revelation of God's word, but by the saving illumination of the Spirit, discerning the truth, beauty and glory of them, still have very dark and imperfect views of these mysterious doctrines. They are still unable to comprehend the manner of their existence, and unable to answer all objections and solve all difficulties concerning them. These doctrines, to the "natural man" are in every sense of the word, mysteries; so that though they are externally revealed to him in God's word, he counts them foolishness. And even to those to whom it is given to know the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," they still remain in a great measure mysterious, and command their study, wonder and admiration.

3. In its *design*. The gospel was designed to display the glory of God's gracious, merciful, covenant character, as the "Father of mercies" and "God of salvation." Its grand object was to show how illustriously all the divine attributes and perfections harmonize and shine, in the eternal salvation of mankind sinners in Jesus Christ. The way of reconciliation to God is entirely above and beyond the capacity of human reason, and therefore must appear mysterious. Reason is insufficient to point out any way of redemption that is perfectly consistent with all the attributes of God.

Again, the second and subordinate design of the gospel is to bring sinners into a saving union with the Son of God. "This is a great mystery," says Paul; but I speak concern-

ing Christ and the Church." Its design is to make them holy, in a gracious conformity to the image of God, and similarity (of likeness) to Christ; who is the first-born among many brethren. Hence they are said to be "partakers of the divine nature," and "partakers of his holiness." And finally, the design of the gospel is to bring miserable sinners to perfect and eternal happiness in the enjoyment of the glory of God in Christ forever.

For to obtain these grand designs, the gospel, when rightly preached, displays the riches of the divine grace in such a manner, that saving faith may by means of it be produced and promoted in the soul, and so the sinner is saved unto eternal life. "God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you the hope of glory." Thus the mystery and design of God will be finished in the glory of his rich grace and eternal salvation of perishing sinners.

4. In its *effects*. The very different, yea, opposite effects which the gospel produces upon different persons, can not be accounted for satisfactorily on the principles of human reason. To some it is the "savor of life unto life," and to others the "savor of death unto death," and yet the natural condition of both is the same. These different effects must be attributed to some supernatural cause. It must be resolved into the "mystery of God's will," the divine sovereignty, in "the vessels of mercy" to the praise of his grace and mercy; and in the vessels of wrath to the praise of his eternal justice and immutable holiness. In the case of those who believe the gospel to the salvation of their immortal souls, the manner of its operation is mysterious. Our Saviour, speaking of the saving change that takes place in regeneration by means of the gospel, speaks of it as mysterious. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." The child of God may say, "herein is a marvellous thing, I know that whereas I was born blind, now I see." Of the union of Christ and believers the apostle says; "This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the church:" and the apostle, in the verse following the text, says, that "Christ in them the hope of glory," is a mystery. The life of faith and holiness which the believer lives as the blessed effect of the gospel, is mysterious. Hence the apostle speaks of the gospel as the "mystery of faith," and the great "mystery of godliness;" because faith and holiness are produced, and promoted by the

“word of God, even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and generations, but now is made manifest to the saints.” The believer in Christ may adopt the paradoxical language of the apostle, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Yea, the mysterious effects of the gospel shall be felt in the blessed resurrection of the righteous to eternal life and glory. “Behold,” says the apostle, “I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

II. The gospel preserves the nature of a mystery, in every period and degree of its revelation.

That must certainly be a proper mystery, which is not manifested and can not be known but by a special revelation from God. But that the manifestation of this mystery was made by God, the apostle asserts when he says that “God hath made known to us the mystery of his will.” And again, “he hath made known to the saints what is the riches of the glory of this mystery.” And hence the apostle calls it, “The mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” The apostle intimates in the text, that the gospel has had very different degrees of manifestation under the Old and New Testament dispensations. In the former it was so obscure that it may be said to be “hid,” when compared with the clear display under the latter. In both dispensations it is a mystery; in the former it was a “hidden mystery,” in the latter a mystery revealed. “The mystery hid from ages and generations, is now made manifest to the saints.” It can not be properly said, that what is a mystery is entirely unknown, while it is a mystery. Thus it was a mystery under the Old Testament dispensation, that God would call the Gentiles into his church. “The mystery of Christ,” says Paul, “in other ages, was not made known to the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.” (Eph. iii. 4—6. But this mystery was not wholly unknown under the Old Testament dispensation. For God predicts by Malachi, saying, ‘my name shall be great among the Gentiles.’ The Father

predicts concerning his Son saying, "I will give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles," and promises to the Son, "I will give thee, the heathen for thine inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession," and "unto thee shall the Gentiles seek"—"unto thee shall the Gentiles come from the ends of the earth." When therefore the apostle says that the calling of the Gentiles was a mystery "hid from ages and from generations" and "not made known unto the sons of men," we must not understand these expressions absolutely, but comparatively, with respect to the manner and degree of manifestation. The mystery was not under the Old Testament dispensation so clearly manifested "as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets," and "now made manifest to his saints." It was not then manifested or made known, with respect to the manner and circumstances of it: such as, the miracles attending the gospel when first preached,—the great number of Gentile converts, their great knowledge, faith and godliness,—the clear discovery of things before dark and mysterious,—the rejection of the Jews and subversion of their polity,—and the signal triumph of the gospel over the ancient heathenish idolatry and superstition.

In the first "ages" of the world "and generations of the sons of men," this mystery of the gospel was in a great measure "hid." The promises and predictions of a Saviour, and salvation through him were "dark sayings." The first gospel promise, of Christ as "the seed of the woman, who should bruise the head of the serpent," must have been truly astonishing and mysterious, to our first parents. And although the promises and predictions made to the patriarchs, were more clear and particular, yet their true meaning behoved to be mysterious.

Under the Mosaic economy the "hidden mystery was veiled under types, and ceremonies, "which were a shadow of good things to come." Gospel peace was exhibited to them, in promises, prophetic declarations, and instituted rites. The language, of that economy, had a mystical signification, which the prophets themselves, did not fully understand: "Of which salvation, the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you; searching what, or what manner of time the spirit of Christ, which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand, the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us, they did minister the things which are now

reported unto you, by them that have preached the gospel, unto you—with the Holy Ghost, sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into." (1 Pet. 1. 10—12.)

Even under the New Testament dispensation, "which excels in glory," the gospel retains the nature of a mystery. The revelation or manifestation of the mystery is unfolded, but the mystery itself remains unveiled. The doctrines of the gospel, are such profound mysteries that none can fathom their depth, but the Spirit of inspiration, "who searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God." The apostle says, when speaking of the preaching of the gospel, "we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory." The more we contemplate the mysteries of redemption, the more completely will they engage our study and command our reverence, wonder and admiration. We may well say with the apostle, "without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness:" and with the Psalmist, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I can not attain unto it." The apostle says, "I would not, brethren, that ye, should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits, that blindness in part is happened unto Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." And yet the apostle finds the mystery of calling the Gentiles as connected with the rejection of the Jews, so deep, and dark, in its nature that he cries out, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out." "The mystery of God shall be finished," when the marvellous craft and cruelty, and the mighty power and impiety of antichrist, "the mystery of iniquity," shall be completely crushed; and when all the gracious purposes, precious promises, dark predictions and wonderful providences which respect the church militant, shall be accomplished.

Conclusion.—Inferences.

1. The gospel is to be heard with reverence and attention, and received with faith and love. It is a mystery, and we should study it. It is the word of God, and we ought to believe, love and obey it.

2. The unsearchable wisdom of God in devising, and his infinite loving kindness in revealing such a wonderful plan of salvation. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out."

3. The spiritual blindness of mankind and the necessity of divine illumination and instruction. "The natural man receiveth not the things of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned." "No man knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him." "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."

4. The change of the dispensation of grace, and the calling of the Gentiles, are truly mysterious. It must be resolved into the sovereign will and good pleasure of Him who worketh all things according to the counsel of his will, and gives account of his matters to none.

5. The mysteries of grace exceed those of nature. The latter are the effect of God's wisdom, goodness and power; but in the former all the divine perfections are displayed in a most wonderful manner. The philosophic mind may delight, in some degree and for some time, in searching out the mysteries of nature in which his eternal happiness does not consist. But the gracious soul will delight forever in contemplating the deep and adorable mysteries of grace in which his eternal welfare is involved.

6. Gospel mysteries are objects of faith. The light of nature cannot discover them, neither can human reason comprehend them. Though we can not understand these mysteries fully, we ought to receive and believe them upon the authority of him who has revealed them to us in his word. In the eternal world the mysteries of providence and grace will be more fully unfolded to the saints. "Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now we know in part; but then shall we know even as we are known."

"Now to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith: to God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen."