

Twentieth Century Addresses

GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE U. S. A.

ACADEMY OF MUSIC

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

May 17, 1901

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION AND SABBATH-SCHOOL WORK

1902

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THE DUTY AND OPPORTUNITIES OF
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY THE

REV. SAMUEL J. NICCOLLS, D.D., LL. D.

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FATHERS AND BRETHREN:—

It would be to our discredit as representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ, to ask on such an occasion as this, and at so late an hour in her history, "What is the supreme mission of the Church?" To confess that we had not yet discovered it, would be to proclaim ourselves unworthy of our position. It was declared long ago, and with such plainness of definition that there is no room for doubt or speculation concerning it. The divine Founder of the Church has said, "As thou hast sent me into the world even so have I also sent them into the world." The mission of Jesus Christ defines the mission of his Church. It is an unchangeable one, the same in the twentieth century that it was in the first; and so it will continue while time lasts. The Church of the twentieth century, if true to Christ, has no new gospel to preach, no other

foundation to lay than that which has been laid, no other Book from which to teach men, than that inspired and infallible one of which she has been the custodian for ages, and no other power by which to save men and subdue the nations, than that which comes from a crucified, but now risen and exalted, Saviour. She has no other work to accomplish than that defined in our Lord's last command.

But while the great mission of the Church remains the same, her opportunities for service and the corresponding special duties do not. With the changing times come new duties; and there must be a wise discerning of the times by the followers of Christ if they would faithfully discharge their mission. That the new century has brought us face to face with new problems, new conditions of life, and changes in the world, which if they had been foretold to those who lived at the beginning of the nineteenth century, would have appeared incredible, is a fact so often dwelt upon that it has become commonplace. There is also, a growing conviction that still greater changes are near at hand. There is a concurrence of signs attesting this. As by some prophetic instinct, devout men feel that God is preparing a new and glorious revelation of his kingdom; and that he is rallying the forces under his control for new conquests. It is a time of confusion and unrest, of breaking away from old customs and beliefs. Men are musing,

searching after truth, and exploiting new opinions. They are casting aside old environments, challenging old faiths, and testing all things. Social and political changes affecting the temporal destinies of one third of the human race have taken place before our eyes with a rapidity that creates amazement; and the end is not yet. Knowledge has broadened; the discoveries of science have conquered space and time and brought the ends of the earth together. There is no land of which we can say as in former centuries, it is remote; no nation whose condition does not concern us. Trade and science in their work have confirmed a fact long ago proclaimed but dimly seen in the past, that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." We are realizing as never before the brotherhood of humanity, the solidarity of the race. No nation can live unto itself. It is in the midst of such conditions that we, as a Church, stand. What are the opportunities and what is the duty, of the hour? We must not arrogantly claim for ourselves a supreme position in the Church Universal, nor assume to direct and discharge all its ministries. We are only a part of it, a branch raised up as we believe for a special service; and our history ought to interpret, at least in part, our special mission. There ought to be that in it which justifies our separate and distinct organization, and warrants its continuance. If not, it is high time that we should abandon our

claims and move for a dissolution. But we are not in doubt, nor do we come to the present hour dismayed, distracted, and uncertain, as to our mission. One fact is evident beyond dispute; the Presbyterian Church has borne steadfast and uncompromising witness to the truth as we have found it in the word of God. She has been distinguished as a doctrinal Church. She has fearlessly written out her creed, large and full, that there might be no misunderstanding of her testimony; and she has maintained it at no small sacrifice. Discarding forms and rituals as of little value, and utterly rejecting the commandments and traditions of men, she has sought to set forth the doctrines taught in Holy Scripture. Whether her creed is the best that can be written, is not now the question; but this much is certain, that among all the branches of the Church of Christ she has insisted most strenuously upon the supreme authority of the word of God, and has given to the world the most complete and orderly statement of its doctrines. Remembering the words of the great Head of the Church, that he came into the world to bear witness to the truth, she believes that one of the first duties of the Church is to teach men the testimony of Jesus Christ, and, with this conviction unchanged, she faces the world of the twentieth century. It is admitted that it is a time of restlessness, changing opinions, and unsettled beliefs. Multitudes, some with eagerness and some with the

accents of despair, are saying, "Who will show us any good?" But what is all this but an opportunity to witness for the truth! It is no time for silence, or for the casting away of sound doctrine, or for setting our sails to catch some breeze of popular favor. This confusion, this multiplication of fantastic notions in religion, this testing of creeds, is in one sense not an evil sign. Better this than apathy, or the complacent and unreasoning deadness of a superficial orthodoxy. John Milton said, "Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making." In a time of confusion and doubt we need most of all to hear the voice of certainty; the clear, strong, and conscience-compelling accent of the truth. The Church of Rome, ever on the alert, has sought to supply this need with her doctrine of papal infallibility. Have we any testimony to make? If so, now is the hour to speak. Let us not mislead ourselves with the cry "work, work," and then in some quiet peaceful day settle our beliefs. No! the truth first, and the truth always. It is the instrument by which we must work, the sword by which we must conquer. The Church that the twentieth century needs, the one that is to be foremost in controlling its destinies, is the one that shall have the purest and plainest scriptural creed, and that will fearlessly and honestly preach it.

I have said that our Church has been characterized in the past as doctrinal, and this feature has been no small part of her strength and glory. Whatever truth we possess we must keep to the end. But if we have made any new discoveries of truth in the inexhaustible word of God, if we have obtained any broader and clearer views of divine teaching, it is equally our duty to proclaim that to the world. As faithful witnesses for Christ we must tell the whole truth as we know it, and in its right relations. Furthermore that truth must be expressed in adaptation to the needs of the times. There is no need to change our testimony in order to please men; that would be to betray the truth; but change in form is often required to meet the needs of men and of the times.

Man's sin determined the form in which divine grace was revealed, and a sin-ruined humanity was the mold in which gospel redemption was cast. Just so credal statements, if they are to be serviceable, must be framed in view of the needs and conditions of the times. The alignment of truth must change in its advancing warfare. The doctrines placed in the forefront at one time are not those that ought to occupy that critical place at another. A creed is not an unchangeable product, and, when it would take the place of the unchangeable word of God, when scholastic theology would make a palimpsest of Holy Scripture, and prevent further light breaking forth from its pages, it is high time

for the Church to awake and to assert its freedom under its ancient charter. For myself, I hold that we have no reason to abandon the venerable Confession of Faith made by our fathers, but the rather to write it larger and clearer. By God's grace we know something they did not, or at least did not clearly express. A growing Church will not be marked by a shriveling creed, nor by one that includes only the alphabet of the Christian faith; but by a larger and growing testimony to the truth. There is such a thing as the development of doctrine in the consciousness of the Church. Change may be made from greatness to littleness; but there is also a change from glory unto glory, which it is our privilege to make through the Spirit of God.

As American citizens, we have a banner which none of us would ever wish to see changed. Its colors were caught from the pure heavens above us; it is associated with all that is glorious in our country's history. It is the emblem of liberty, law and human brotherhood, the world over. It is the visible creed of the rights of man. It proclaims the sovereignty of the people, the reign of a Christian democracy. The sight of it thrills our pulses, and sets our hearts to beating with emotions of loftiest patriotism. Under its folds we have liberty, peace, and security; and palsied be the hand that would erase from it a single stripe or star. Yet could some patriot who helped to carry it from Boston to Yorktown now look upon it, he would

say, "It is the same dear old flag, but I see that it has changed! The field, the field is not the same!" Yes, truly; there is more of heaven's constellations in it, a greater splendor of the stars. It tells of a wider sovereignty, of new conquests, and of increased multitudes gathered under its protecting folds. It is the old banner of the past and yet it tells of progress. So let it be with that old blue banner which symbolizes our faith, the banner of the covenant theology. Let it be unchanged, yet changed; let there be more of heaven's grace in it, a brighter luster of holy truth, a wider sweep of its folds, and then let us bear it to the ends of the earth for a testimony unto Christ our Lord.

But we owe also the duty of service. That this duty inheres in the very nature of the Church needs no argument in a presence like this. Our Lord came "not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many"; and his ministry, if we are true to him, is to be perpetuated by us. It is also so clearly defined that no one who reads the gospel with an open mind need misunderstand it. That gospel bids us feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick, befriend the poor, and lift up the fallen. It teaches us to regard the temporal welfare of men and to seek the good of society. It lays its hand upon all human relations and pursuits to purify and ennoble them. What is called civilization is, in its last analysis, applied religion; and the nature of the religion de-

termines the nature of the civilization. But beyond this and superior to it, is the ministry of the gospel with reference to the higher, the spiritual and eternal interests of men. Its effects in what is called Christian civilization, manifold and beneficent as they are, are only its by-products. It seeks as its chief end the redemption of man from sin and his exaltation as a child of God to eternal glory. For this sublime and world—embracing service, God has endowed his Church not only with the supernatural and all-essential gift of the Holy Spirit, and his written word of truth, but also with subordinate and personal gifts such as mental endowments, intelligence, scientific knowledge, wealth, and inventions. In one respect the Church is no stronger now than it was in the first century, when a little company of disciples went forth to conquer the world with no other endowment than the might of the Holy Spirit, and the simple gospel message; and these must ever be the secret of her strength. Forgetting them, and relying on her numbers, her wealth, her institutions, and her intelligence, she is destined to disastrous defeat. But God has been pleased to grant additional gifts for the ministry of healing and helpfulness to men; gifts which are better in their use than those miraculous ones which characterized the apostolic age. The wonder-worker is not necessarily a better man through the exercise of miraculous power. Our Lord has told us that many shall say unto him at the last day,

“Lord, Lord, have we not cast out devils in thy name, and in thy name done many wonderful works?” To whom he shall say, “I never knew you.” But the man who consecrates and uses his gifts of intelligence or wealth, or power to the service of Christ is by that very ministry made a better man. Such service demands self-sacrifice and that is the royal way to advancement.

Let us then consider the condition of our Church with reference to these special endowments. What a contrast between our position to-day and that of our fathers who met in this city a little over one hundred years ago! They were few in numbers, we are many; they were weak in earthly resources, we are strong; they were poor, we are rich; they were limited in their opportunities, ours are boundless and open to the ends of the earth. Their facilities for labor were few, ours are great and multiplied: books, schools, colleges, printing presses, organized institutions, travel made easy, time and space conquered, all that science has discovered, powers of nature waiting like swift and mighty angels to do our bidding—all these are at our service. Such is our endowment, as we stand, at the threshold of the new century, and surely it does not require the wisdom of a sage, or the foresight of a prophet, to interpret its significance. We must remember the peril as well as the greatness of our position. History shows us how nations have advanced to a high degree of civilization, power

and wealth, and then, their meridian passed, began to decline, and at last perished in dishonor. It is usually said that wealth and luxury destroyed them; but the deeper reason is, that they were faithless to the divine law of true progress. Not their wealth and power, but their selfishness, led to their decline. Unwilling to share with others their high privileges, they lost the power which makes a nation great, and which extends and perpetuates its life. The same law applies to the Church. There is a notable illustration of it in the history of Israel. They were raised up and richly dowered, not for their own sakes, or that they might hold a monopoly of special blessings, but for the sake of others. Through them all nations were to be blessed. But they became exclusive, selfish, glorying in themselves and despising others. Forgetful of their high mission, their strength and glory passed from them, and others were called to take their place. So will it be with us as a Church, if we fail to have a sincere and heart-controlling interest in the great mission to which Christ has called us. A selfish Church glorying in its own greatness is already under a curse. The moment we begin to boast of ourselves as the elect of God and forget others, that moment our decline begins. The enormous wealth of the present time in which our Church has so large a share, and the very civilization which the gospel has helped to create undoubtedly have brought with them corresponding

perils; but the way of escape for us is not to renounce wealth, and to lead society in the name of Christianity back into primitive conditions and the limitations of poverty, but the rather by increased consecration to Christ and more unselfish living, to use all our abundance for the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

As to our opportunities, they are so manifest that he must be blind indeed who cannot see them. But why should I weary you with a list of things to be done? Who does not know that advances and achievements are possible to the Church now, which were not so a hundred years ago, nor even at any previous time since the Christian centuries began. The highways are prepared, every barrier is thrown down, every heathen nation on the globe is open to the labors of the Christian missionary. How significant in this respect is the condition of China, representing one quarter of the population of the whole world. Her swarming multitudes are stirred as never before. They are angry, enraged, humiliated, despairing, longing, but they are thinking and that means much for the future. It is God's ploughing time there, and now is our opportunity to cast the seed. How mistakenly do those read the history of God's dealings in the past who tell us that, since our missionaries have been murdered, and thousands of Christian converts have baptized the soil of China with their blood, since our mission stations have been burned with fire and

the labor of years has disappeared, since foreign aggression has aroused the hatred of the people and stirred up their prejudices to an unwonted degree of violence, our opportunity for the evangelization of China for the present at least is lost. Was it so in Syria, when the infant Church at Jerusalem was scattered abroad by persecution ; and when bigotry, hate, and malice, pursued them to distant cities ? Was it so in the Roman Empire when the power of the emperors and the prejudices and fanaticism of the populace were united to crush the Church ? Did she then, while her martyrs were dying by the thousands in the arena, lose her opportunity to conquer Rome ? Was it so in India when the storm of revolt and religious fanaticism swept over it like a tropical hurricane, and left our mission stations in ruins ? Were the gates of opportunity closed there because of the martyrdom of some of the noblest of our missionaries ?

What do our missionaries, who having passed through their baptism of fire and blood still live, say with reference to the outlook in China ? Do they proclaim the cause lost and stand terrified and unnerved saying, "Send us where you will but do not bid us return to a hopeless field to labor in face of obstacles that can not be overcome" ? They have suffered much from the revilings and slanders of those who call themselves Christians, but no one yet has dared to dishonor them by putting such words on their lips.

Equally significant in opportunity, is what is called our home field. In the mysterious providence of God, possessions undreamed of have come under the sovereignty of the Republic; and, whatever our courts may decide with reference to the constitution following the flag, one thing is certain, the gospel must go with it if our free institutions are to be successfully planted among the subject races. Without it no laws, no constitution, can lift them up into the high state of freemen. As a Christian people we are especially under obligation to give to those who have come under our care the very best that we possess, and woe be to us if we fail in our duty. We must gird ourselves for the work of a true expansion, or else what we have gained by the sword will result in our shame and ruin. All branches of the Church in America have an interest in this work, but upon no one is the obligation more distinct and imperative than upon us as Presbyterians.

Ours, historically, is the established Church of the Republic, established not by but in her laws, her constitution, and her form of government. The genius of Presbyterianism is the genius of Republicanism. The ideal social state, the democracy of the future will not be one ruled by a hierarchy, but one in which all are kings and priests unto God.

But no view of our position as a Church at this critical time would be complete if it did not embrace our relations to men and society in our native land.

Here in this land of ours, which God in his providence has so strangely exalted and placed in the forefront among the nations, are to be solved the problems that vitally concern the advancement of the kingdom of God; and here we must find our opportunities for highest service. Opportunities are the angels that wait on duty. Sometimes they come clothed with such splendor and beauty that we are eager to follow them. Again, they come in plain everyday garb so that we scarcely heed them; and still again they come in such dread array that they terrify us and we are ready to flee. They are robed as perils, they seem to threaten us, and we call them dangers. We must distinguish between our facilities and our opportunities. The physician's instruments, his medicines, and his skill, are his facilities; but when the plague comes with its terrors, and the sick and the suffering lie in his pathway, there is his opportunity. Discipline, alertness of movement, and improved weapons, are an army's facilities; but when the foe with uplifted banners and advancing columns confronts it, there is its opportunity. So with us; what are called perils to society are in a true sense our opportunities. The perils of wealth and of the slums, of growing vice, immorality, ignorance and superstition, of anarchy and discontent among the poor, and greed among the rich, of an education that is godless, and of a gross materialism that is blind to the real good of life,—all these are manifest. They

threaten us, and they must be met and overcome if the new century is to mark an advance for humanity. We are beginning to see as never before that the gospel has something to do with society, and that if it cannot be eyes to the blind, help to the needy, protection to the oppressed, and bring peace and comfort to all men here, it will not commend itself to them as having the promise of the life which is to come. For this work we have as a Church, a richness of facilities in organization, wealth, knowledge, numbers, and position; but are we alive to our opportunities? Have we not been more content with our privileges than we have been eager to minister to others? The masses of the people, and especially the world of labor estranged from our Church, misunderstanding us, and misled by a Christless gospel, proclaim that something is wrong. Serious thinkers are beginning to realize that there must be some new adjustment or adaptation of our Christian forces, or, at least, that a new enthusiasm for service must be awakened among us, or we will be left in the rear, and others will be called of God to take our place and win the crown of the overcomers. Between atheistic anarchism on one side, which is individualism gone mad, and pantheistic communism on the other, which would rob the individual of his rights and merge all into a common life, a Church like ours should stand witnessing to the true and divine order of society. She should proclaim, as she

has done in the past, the sacredness of the individual and his freedom under God, and at the same time the brotherhood of men and their equality as the children of God. But to do this she must like her Lord, be willing to live with the poor and to gain their confidence by her unselfish services. If other Churches build Christian schools and colleges and universities, erect hospitals and asylums, send missionaries and deaconesses to the destitute and lowly, and preach the gospel to the poor, while we stand idly by boasting of our past, to them will be given the glory of saving our land for Christ ; while upon us will be the curse of Meroz. We may well dread for ourselves that conservatism of material prosperity which chills sympathy and benumbs the conscience.

In the last century we yielded, to our hurt, to the blighting influences of human slavery. Now the commercialism of the age threatens and infects us.

We must get rid of it, and in the spirit of self-sacrifice and self-denial go out to serve our fellow-men. Let us remember that in all the past the Church has conquered by her martyrs, and not by her millionaires. Her prayers, tears, and sacrifices, have been her power.

We are tempted at an hour like this, to engage in prevision; or at least to dream of what the new century will bring to the race. But the curtain that hides the future will not rise at our bidding. This much however we know, for it is the assurance

which the cherished faith of our Church brings us; God's eternal purpose in Christ Jesus runs through the ages, and history is the revelation of it. It cannot be defeated. This century, like those which preceded it, will help to carry us on to the glorious consummation. The position which we occupy in this age-long movement is a most solemn and responsible one. We are the heirs of the past. Apostles, martyrs, confessors, saintly men and women who have toiled for the salvation of others, and who have borne heroic witness to the truth, intrust their gains to us to transmit them to the future. It is given to us by our indifference to retard, or by our fidelity to hasten, the coming of our Lord. Certainly it is no time for discouragement or lamentation. Jesus Christ was an optimist with regard to his work. With a world in darkness round him, with a Church that would not receive him, with few followers, and one of them a traitor, with the shameful death of the cross before him, and the powers of darkness assailing him, he said, "this gospel of mine shall be preached among all nations for a witness unto them." "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." In view of all that has occurred since then, and of the outlook given to us in the dawning of the twentieth century, can any one of his followers be pessimistic? Nay, rather let us shout in the assurance of hope, and gird ourselves for the service that awaits us. We need to be more hopeful, more

confident, and more enthusiastic, for we follow a leader who knows no defeat. Let us here, round the ancient altars of our faith, be anointed afresh for our work.

“Ours the needed Truth to speak,
Right the wrong and raise the weak ;
Ours to make earth’s desert glad,
In its Eden greenness clad ;
Ours to work as well as pray,
Clearing thorny wrongs away,
Plucking up the weeds of sin,
Letting Heaven’s warm sunshine in ;
Watching on the hills of Faith,
Listening what the Spirit saith ;
Catching gleams from temple-spires,
Hearing notes from angel choirs ;
Like the seer of Patmos gazing,
On the glory downward blazing ;
Till, upon earth’s grateful sod,
Rests the city of our God.”