

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Bishop Berkeley and the Bermudas.

BY THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.D.

SOME of the brightest lights of missionary history have shone in the darkest ages of the Church. We have turned, perhaps, to the cheering warmth and solitary brilliancy of such examples when chilled by prevailing apathy and selfishness, and disposed to take a dark view of life. The devotion of Raymund Lull, in the Middle Ages, has never been surpassed; the example of Francis Xavier, however mistaken his methods, is calculated to inspire many who may have a clearer knowledge of the truth, but a less fervent zeal for Christ.

It is customary to regard the eighteenth century as one of the darkest of dead periods of the past. It has been pointed out that a Church could not be wholly dead which could produce a Butler, a Berkeley, and a Wilson, while several distinguished ornaments of Nonconformity flourished in the same period. Yet there were certainly solid grounds for Bishop Butler's well-known despondency as to the religious life of the nation—and Berkeley himself witnesses to the danger. We know how God in His good providence brought revival, and how revival paved the way for missionary zeal; but the preceding period, with its sceptical worldliness faced by cold orthodoxy, was not the kind of soil in which we should look for even a single conspicuous example of missionary fruitfulness. It must not be forgotten that two great Church Societies had their origin about the very opening of the century of which we are speaking; and this is another piece of evidence that there must have been a certain amount of real life. But the century produced a quite notable example of missionary fervour in the person of one of those already named—a leading dignitary of the Church—George Berkeley of philosophic fame, Dean of Derry and afterwards Bishop of Cloyne. His renown as a philosopher has been allowed too much to divert attention from the bright example of his missionary spirit, which has perhaps been still further

eclipsed by the failure, through no fault of his own, of his missionary schemes. George Berkeley, ardent missionary in a cold, unspiritual age, provides, in his way, as inspiring a pattern as any that can be found.

A double interest is attached to the study of Berkeley as a missionary pioneer. There is the interest of the facts of his life, and especially of the plan he formed to further his projects ; and perhaps still more absorbing is the psychological interest arising from the study of his many-sided character in the light of this leading motive.

To take the facts first—sick at heart, apparently, with the condition of the Old World, he turned his thoughts to the New. The collapse of the South Sea Company, together with many frauds of lesser dimensions, led to an "Essay towards preventing the ruin of Great Britain."¹ But his outlook travelled farther afield than his immediate surroundings, and he was stirred to larger efforts than the suggestion of practical remedies for prevailing corruption at home. What he had heard of the heathenish condition of European planters in America moved his soul as we are moved to-day by tales of the wilds of North-West Canada or of the backwoods of Australia ; while he was equally concerned for the souls of the natives on the American continent. The method he proposed is of peculiar interest. He would establish a college at Bermuda, and make that island, as Dr. Stock puts it, "a modern Iona."² A President and Fellows were to settle there, and students were to be trained as pastors and missionaries. This was to be the centre whence pure streams should flow to refresh and make fruitful a whole new world—which should be used to establish religion in the West when its influence seemed waning in the East. And an interesting feature in the scheme, in view of modern missionary developments, is that it comprehended the ultimate inclusion of training in agriculture and industries for those who did not respond to academical studies.

¹ "Berkeley and Percival," by Benjamin Rand, p. 29.

² "History of the C.M.S.," i. 24.

This project has been written down as unpractical, chiefly because of certain difficulties involved in the position and circumstances of the island selected for the venture. But Berkeley's enthusiastic description of the climatic and other conditions shows that there were two sides to this question.¹ And in any case we must not view the matter from the standpoint of the last hundred years of missionary experience. Berkeley had practically no modern precedents to guide him, and it is not unnatural that a student like himself should turn to the example of Columba and his associates—if, indeed, Iona and its band of student and industrial missionaries were present to his mind, as they may well have been. If a body of sixth-century evangelists could influence not merely a great part of Britain, but also ultimately large tracts of Europe as far as the Apennines, Berkeley may well have turned to so hopeful a precedent as he laboured in thought for America and the West Indies.

At all events, whether the scheme was unpractical or no, it was formed with an abundance of practical detail, as may be proved by reference to *A Proposal for the better supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for converting the savage Americans to Christianity, by a College to be erected in the Summer Islands, otherwise called the Isles of Bermudas*. All kinds of carefully considered reasons contributed to the choice of this spot. Healthy climate; plentiful provisions; absence from temptations of trade, luxury, and licentiousness; easy communication with various parts of America and with Britain—all these considerations are stated as having weight in the selection. Reasons are given for greatly preferring Bermuda to Barbadoes, where Codrington College had already been projected. Plainly the scheme had been carefully thought out. Dr. Rand, in his recent edition of the correspondence between Berkeley and Sir John (afterwards Lord) Percival, to which reference has already been made, shows how Berkeley himself wavered in his choice after settling at Rhode Island and seeing

¹ See "Berkeley and Percival," pp. 203-6.

its advantages for his purpose; but it does not appear that he ever turned from his original idea with settled resolution, while he was perfectly determined to adhere to it when the trend of circumstances seemed to make that decision advisable on other grounds.¹

When we turn to Berkeley's method of advancing his plan, we reach the second part of our subject, and are introduced to those interesting and instructive psychological features which the character of this unique missionary displays. We are impressed, first of all, by the proofs of a *true missionary spirit*. Dr. Rand tells us that romance and philanthropy were united as the essential factors animating his scheme.² But he well sees its greatness; and the object of this paper is to show that the latter was the dominant motive, and, indeed, that it was backed by a much higher aim still—the glory of God and the salvation of men. Berkeley sought preferment in the Church, we are told, merely with the idea of obtaining more influence to recommend his American scheme. Surely this was a rare spirit in those days, even if he was too much inclined to rely upon the aid of the powerful and great. This was no doubt the case; but again we must make allowances. At any rate he associated with the great, as he said himself, not because he loved Courts, but because he loved America. An unexpected legacy from a perfect stranger was accepted as a providential assistance to his dominating purpose. In fact, the extent to which he subordinated everything to one end is illustrated in the most intimate personal details. He chose his wife with his missionary enterprise in view. "She goes," he says, "with great cheerfulness to live a plain farmer's life, and wear stuff of her own spinning-wheel." He urges that a man should so regulate his charity "that it might extend to the greatest wants of the greatest number of his fellow-creatures." He deploras "the infamy of England and scandal of the world," in that the negroes on the plantations "continue heathen under Christian masters, and in Christian countries." Finally, to prove his sincerity, though

¹ See "Berkeley and Percival," pp. 40, 42-43, 238, 256. ² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

sick at heart with vexatious delays, he actually sailed to the West, where he spent nearly three years in Rhode Island, most of the time awaiting developments, and ready to go on to Bermuda (which circumstances did not permit at the moment) when the way was open.¹

Once more we find in Berkeley *the model missionary pleader*. Not only did he collect a large sum by subscriptions, but Walpole himself was positively induced to contribute. A delightful story is told by Dr. Fraser in the Life which is prefixed to his edition of "Berkeley's Complete Works." The Scriblerus Club planned to rally him on his scheme. "He asked to be heard in defence, and presented the case with such force of enthusiasm that the company 'were struck dumb, and after a pause simultaneously rose and asked leave to accompany him.'" The author adds, "Bermuda for a time inspired London."² The imagination responds to this stirring picture of a refined philosopher evoking, practically single-handed, the enthusiastic adherence of so many in the flippant society of such an age. Plainly, he was a missionary advocate of no mean order, and he was moved by the deepest and truest motives.

Yet again we see him meeting *the familiar missionary criticisms*. His plan was considered quixotic and visionary by a correspondent of Lord Percival's, who thought it likely to prove "a religious frenzy" and "a wild undertaking." The Parliamentary vote of £20,000 in support of the enterprise (which was never paid after all) was carried almost unanimously, but quite against "all men's expectations," as, for one thing, "great interest and opposition had been made against it from several quarters and upon different principles, motives, and surmises, some whereof had got into the heads of very considerable persons." Swift, in writing from Ireland a recommendation of Berkeley to Lord Carteret, cannot refrain from

¹ For the above facts and references, see "Berkeley's Complete Works," ed. A. C. Fraser, vol. i., pp. xlix-li, liv-lix; vol. iv., pp. 347, 361; and "Berkeley and Percival," pp. 32, 207-8, 236.

² *Op. cit.*, vol. i., p. l.

suggesting the advisability of trying to persuade "one of the first men in the kingdom for learning and virtue" to remain "quiet at home." And Berkeley himself, besides giving Lord Percival the above quoted account of his difficulties, takes pains, in his "Proposal," to answer "men of narrow minds" who "have a peculiar talent at objection." When we come to see what the objections were, we find among them, in other words, our old friends the home heathen and the "worthless" native convert. All which shows that human nature is very much the same in all ages, and that it is rather difficult to devise new excuses for not helping Foreign Missions. It need scarcely be added that so missionary-hearted a man was moved by none of these things.¹

It is true that some of Berkeley's missionary ideals will not stand the test of a more enlightened standard of procedure; but the circumstances and atmosphere of the age in which he lived must be taken into account. It has been already mentioned that he seems to have depended too much for success upon the patronage and favour of the great. It was this, in reality, that wrecked his scheme—even if at first it seemed to give it the start. For after all the delays and suspense the promised parliamentary grant was never paid, and Walpole's apparent support proved truly a broken reed. But besides, it must be admitted that the following extract from the "Proposal" has a quaint sound: "The young Americans necessary for this purpose may, in the beginning, be procured, either by peaceable methods from those savage nations which border on our Colonies, and are in friendship with us, or by taking captive the children of our enemies"²! But even here there is not necessarily the suggestion of expeditions specially planned for the latter purpose; and in any case we have moved far since the days when, for instance, slavery was a matter of course. The idea of forcibly abducting the children of enemies when opportunity

¹ For above references, see "Berkeley's Complete Works," vol. i., p. liv; vol. iv., pp. 345, 357-358; "Berkeley and Percival," pp. 231-232, 244.

² "Berkeley's Complete Works," vol. iv., p. 348.

arose in time of conflict, and training them as Christian teachers, was evidently not at that time calculated to strike the world as peculiar, or it could scarcely have been so innocently made.¹

Now how does all this bear upon the psychological study before mentioned? Berkeley was hardly the man whom a superficial observer would expect to manifest and evoke deep missionary enthusiasm in any age—much less in the midst of the dead callousness of the generation in which he was called to live. The common notion of him is that he was the author of a fine-spun philosophy which endeavoured to disprove the reality of things; and though he himself protested with justice that this was precisely what he did *not* do, yet it must be owned that comparatively few minds will be capable of grasping what he really did mean, and that his philosophy gave a handle, however unfairly used, for sceptics who followed. At any rate, a mind that could evolve subtle theories that even his critics did not properly understand, was not exactly the kind of mind which one would expect to feel concern about Indian savages. Take a concrete example from a familiar sentence in his writings. Imagine the kind of character which can put forth “reiterated efforts and pangs of thought to apprehend the general idea of a triangle,” and (though a student of mathematics) find it “altogether incomprehensible,”² and you will not say, offhand, that such a man is likely to burn with missionary fervour. Or, again, a rooted conviction of the benefits of tar-water as a panacea for human ailments does not at first sight seem to harmonize with a proportioned view of man’s more serious ills—though we shall see presently that there is, in Berkeley’s case, much more connection than appears between the two subjects.

What then shall we say of this remarkable combination of the speculative with the practical? Are two discordant ele-

¹ It is true that one of Berkeley’s critics scornfully wrote that he could only get his Indians by a military expedition to the mainland to capture them; but it does not appear that he was alluding to Berkeley’s words above quoted, or, as just remarked, that this was what Berkeley himself had in view. See “Berkeley and Percival,” pp. 244–245.”

² “Berkeley’s Complete Works,” vol. i., p. 188.

ments bound together in unique fashion in a single mind? Or were all these theories and philosophies nothing but amiable fads—the recreations or the hobbies of a man really engaged in more serious matters? One has only to follow the desperate earnestness of Berkeley's persistent repetitions to find that this, at all events, is not the true explanation.

The real fact appears to be simple. Both sides of his nature were in perfect harmony, because the same grand purpose ran through all. We may agree or disagree with his distinctive philosophic tenets, we may laugh at his "fads"; but, if we come anywhere near understanding his character, we shall see that they were all part and parcel of the one great object in life. The speculative was, to him, ever the handmaid of the practical. Deeply engrossed as his subtle mind doubtless was in the course of his argument, viewed merely as a thing by itself, there was always the highest end in view. By his distinctive philosophy he firmly believed he had found an unanswerable proof of the being of God. In one of his earliest extant letters to Percival he meets a criticism on his "Essay on Vision" (which was his first philosophical work) on the score of its alleged uselessness. He declares that he has a further treatise in the press, and hopes that what was before laid down will then appear "subservient to the ends of morality and religion," his design being "to demonstrate the existence and attributes of God, the immortality of the soul, the reconciliation of God's foreknowledge with freedom of men, and by showing the emptiness and falseness of several parts of the speculative sciences, to reduce men to the study of religion and things useful."¹ Even his painful efforts to realize the abstract general idea of a triangle, if it had been possible, were all part of this plan—for he persistently inveighed against abstract general ideas as a principal root of all error and confusion. But this was not all. Love to man was as prominent with Berkeley as love to God. Not only does his philosophy of sense-

¹ "Berkeley's Complete Works," vol. i., pp. xxx-xxxi; "Berkeley and Percival," pp. 72-73.

symbolism claim to prove Divine realities, but, as Dr. Fraser put it in his preface to "The Minute Philosopher" (which treatise, it is interesting to note, was written actually in Rhode Island), he showed there "marks of the new direction in which his characteristic enthusiasm was drawn"—viz., the foreign missionary enterprise. "He sees more clearly that men are not independent individuals: they are made for one another: the material world, as a system of sense-signals, enables them to make signs and have social intercourse, each recognizing that he is part of a whole, to the common good of which he ought to contribute, and order his ways and actions suitably—if he would live 'according to nature,' in the high meaning of 'nature.'"¹ Nor would it be difficult to trace the philanthropic motive even in the affection for tar-water which seems to us so quaint, though it made a tremendous impression on his contemporaries. It was a time of much disease, following famine, in his Irish diocese, and his experience among American Indians turned his thoughts to the healing properties of tar. The good philosopher was moved by an honest desire to relieve the pains of mankind. It was all part of the great aim of life.²

This, then, is the true conclusion. Berkeley was both a deeply religious man and a pure philanthropist. He was moved by love to God and man in all he did. The practical aim was ever in view in the most abstruse reflections. Here is the solution of the mystery. The real Berkeley was not a metaphysical enigma but an ardent missionary. He lived with the desire to rescue his fellow-countrymen from unbelief and to bring a new world to Christ. It is possible to question the ultimate effect of his philosophy, or to criticize the practicality of his methods—with all due allowance, as we have seen, for his circumstances; but it is not possible to understand his character without the key provided by the Bermuda project. The metaphysics were subsidiary: zeal for God and love to man were the principles of his life.

The spectacle of a highly-placed dignitary, in an icebound

¹ "Berkeley's Complete Works," vol. ii., p. 4. ² *Ibid.*, vol. i., p. 76.

Church, burning with zeal for the souls of the heathen—of one of the most learned thinkers of his own or any other age abandoning great prospects to live a simple missionary life when practically nobody cared for Missions—this is inspiring enough to deserve rescue from the obscurity into which it has perhaps fallen. And did the effort fail, after all? His friend, Percival, condoling with him on his disappointment, wrote that “the design seems too great and good to be accomplished in an age where men love darkness better than the light, and nothing is considered but with a political view.” But in the same letter he reminds him that “we can but propose, the disposal and events are in God’s hands, who will when He thinks fit effectually bring about what tends to His own glory.” “I own,” he continues, “I do not see at present great reason to hope success, but who knows what sparks of fire may yet remain among the ashes?”¹ The words were almost prophetic. Apart from those quiet reflections which Berkeley himself names at the opening of “Alciphron” as some compensation for his disappointments in his exile, Dr. Fraser quotes the testimony of an American author: “By methods different from those intended by Berkeley, and in ways more manifold than even he could have dreamed, he has since accomplished, and through all coming time, by a thousand ineffaceable influences, he will continue to accomplish, some portion at least of the results which he had aimed at in the founding of his university. It is the old story over again; the tragedy of a Providence wiser than man’s foresight; God giving the victory to His faithful servant even through the bitterness of overruling him and defeating him.”² Dr. Fraser supports by this testimony his own strong statement of the indirect influence of Berkeley on the intellectual and spiritual life of America, and especially on academical education; and Dr. Rand, in his recent volume, endorses the fact of the lasting influence of the famous philo-

¹ “Berkeley and Percival,” pp. 269-270.

² “Berkeley’s Complete Works,” vol. i., pp. lix-lx, quoting Moses Coit Tyler in “Three Men of Letters.”

sopher's visit.¹ The patronage of the great might fail his special scheme; the promises of men, callously broken, might seem to leave his effort a fiasco; but God, who "searcheth the hearts," would never let the work of His faithful servant fall to the ground. Not a seed of good in it would be wasted.



Studies in Texts:

SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMONS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.

BY THE REV. HARRINGTON C. LEES, M.A.

XI.—CHRISTMAS GOOD NEWS.

Texts :—"Fear not, I bring good tidings of great joy.—St. Luke ii. 10.
"O Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, lift up thy voice, be not afraid."—Isa. xl. 9.

[Book of the Month: "PLAIN TALKS ON THE PASTORAL EPISTLES"¹ = PT. Other references: Moulton and Milligan's "Vocabulary of Greek Testament" = VGT. Hastings' "Dictionary of Christ and Gospels" = DCG. J. G. Simpson's "What is the Gospel?" = SG. Plummer's "St. Luke" = PL.]

MANY are in daily dread, bad tidings, great sorrow; son taken away. Turn as relief good tidings, great joy; Son given; "everlasting good news," Rev. xiv. 6. PT. reminds us that simple word "preach" in A.V. often covers much fuller Greek word. Even "evangelize" not quite give sense (p. 67). Consider—

I. ITS NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORS.—More especially Lukan, but frequently Pauline (67), *cf.* Acts x. 36, R.V.; Rom. x. 15, R.V.; Eph. ii. 17, R.V.M. But see Greek in Acts viii. 35, xi. 20, and ("how much more significant," p. 68) Acts xvii. 18,

¹ "Berkeley and Percival," p. 44.

² "Plain Talks on the Pastoral Epistles," by Dr. Eugene Stock, published by Robert Scott. Packed with careful work and suggestive comment as usual.