

XXXV.

The Hardening of Nations.

“The election hath obtained it, and the rest were hardened.”— *Rom. xi. 7.*



St. Paul's word, at the head of this article, is strikingly impressive, and its content exceedingly rich and instructive. It clearly announces the fact that the hardening is not exceptional or occasional, but *universal*, affecting all, who, being in contact with the divine Love, are not saved by it.

The last limitation is necessary, for of the heathen it can not be said that they are hardened. Only they can be hardened who live under the Covenant of Grace. It is true that the heathen develop a reprobate mind. Their heart is darkened. Walking in their own ways they are impelled irresistibly, for the process of sin can not be stopped; but this is not the proper conception of the hardening as the Scripture presents it.

Heathen nations and individuals may come in direct contact with the Lord and His Anointed, as Pharaoh and Sihon through their relations with Israel; and as the Turks and the peoples of India and China who now are in touch with Christian nations and missionaries. Of course, we do not mean to say that mere casual contact with a Christian nation or missionary makes a Mohammedan or heathen nation responsible. This is impossible. When in Epirus the Turks meet hordes who call themselves Christians, but are utterly devoid of the Spirit of Christ and in savagery rather surpass the bashi-bazouks, then no ray from the cross falls upon the crescent by this meeting. The fact that a missionary settles in an obscure corner of a heathen nation, opens a little school, and talks about the Scripture with a few individuals, in a manner which betrays his ignorance of human nature, does not make that nation responsible. They know nothing about it; it leaves the national life wholly untouched.

The Christian nations, their governments, their churches, and their missionaries, may well ask themselves whether by such playing at missions they do not increase their own responsibilities rather than those of the heathen nations. How serious these responsibilities, especially regarding the heathen and Mohammedan nations! Owing to the divine pleasure the Christian nations possess a moral and material superiority. England alone is perfectly able to control China, Japan, the whole of India and Turkey besides. There is not the slightest prospect that the heathen nations will, for a long time to come, be able to cope successfully with the nations of Christendom. In their own native jungles they may be able to maintain themselves, but as soon as they come in the open field they are vanquished. We may harass the Chinese, but it never enters our minds that they will effect a landing upon our shores.



Whether this will so continue is another question. As the Christian nations return more and more to Judaism, and thence to heathenism, it is very possible that they will lose also their material superiority. There are already signs showing that China may some time seri-

ously vex the Christian nations; and in India our possession is not as undisturbed as once it was. The ancient moral greatness and world-supremacy of the heathen nations should not be forgotten; it is only fifteen centuries ago that that state of things was reversed. All the more reason why the Christian nations should consider that they owe their power and glory only to the name of Christ; and that they are responsible unto God for the performance of their duty toward these nations. God demands that we bring them in contact with Christ; and they themselves are entitled to it.

This contact should be comprehensive. It should be noticeable in the European and American settlers in those countries; in the laws and institutions which we impose upon them; in the writings and information which we bring them; especially in our preaching of Christ among them. And comparing these moderate claims with the reported shameful manner in which men calling themselves Christians act in those countries, their immoralities, their cruelties, their grasping, their corrupting of the nations by, their unjust laws and iniquitous practises—*e.g.*, the opium traffic—it is obvious that, instead of our being the cause of the hardening of the heathen nations, our own debt and responsibilities, with regard to them are largely increased.

It is true that some nations have labored among the heathen with great success; there are even some small heathen nations which, owing to their contact with excellent Christian men, governors and missionaries, may be said to have come into contact with Christ; and, if they did not receive Him, such contact must be the cause of their hardening. But these are exceptions, and we members of the Reformed churches can not boast that our share in revolutionizing the heathen world will be very great.

But with these exceptions we limit the hardening to men who, living in Christian countries, have long been under the influence of the Gospel. This applies also to Israel under the Old Covenant. The Church now spread among the nations was hid in Israel. The hardening seldom occurred among the heathen, and as a rule was confined to the Jews. In saying that the elect have obtained it, while the rest were hardened ([Rom. xi. 7](#)), St. Paul evidently refers to Israel exclusively, as appears from the context: “*Israel* hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it; and the rest were hardened.” And then follows a description of this hardening, borrowed from [Isa. xxix. 10](#): “The Lord hath poured out upon them a spirit of deep sleep; eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear.” Hence the hardening which now manifests itself as a *new* working is confined to the Christian Church. The hardening still upon Israel is an after-effect of the *ancient* judgment; it is not new. By their Christ-rejection before Gabbatha, on Calvary, and on Pentecost, they brought it upon themselves, and can not be delivered from it except through the gift of new grace. Hence in the discussion of *present* hardening it does not come into consideration.



As a rule, the hardening which in our days and in our own circles manifests itself is confined to the Christian Church, and follows in the track of holy Baptism.

And here we distinguish a *personal* and a *collective* hardening. With reference to the latter, a sad but well-known fact will explain our meaning. In many districts, here and elsewhere, the correct ideas of holy wedlock are falsified; not only recently, but for ages. This is evident from the fact that the marital relation is entered upon through sin before the marriage is confirmed, making it "*obligatory*," as it is said. This is a collective hardening against the divine blessing of holy wedlock. It is a popular sin which affects not only the individual, but his entire generation and whole environment. In like manner there is sin in every trade and business, without which it is said one can not be a business man. "Every man is a thief in his own store"; and with such-like sinful jests the matter is dismissed. Every new clerk is properly initiated. He that does not know the tricks is deemed incompetent, and the unwilling are said to spoil the game.

In this sense there is a collective hardening in many countries and churches which has fallen upon the multitudes as a spirit of slumber. One has only to compare the churches of Scotland and of Spain to be convinced of the fact. The churches of both countries confess the name of the same Lord Jesus Christ; they read the same Gospel; partly sing the same psalms; there is scarcely one mystery of faith confessed in Scotland that is not confessed in Spain. But with all this similarity, what immeasurable difference! In both nations one is baptized with the same Baptism and nourished with the same Lord's Supper; but how vastly different the manifestation of the ecclesiastical life! We do not deny that in the churches of Scotland there maybe many a lack and defect. We even allow that in the Church of Spain there may be an occasional tender glow of love, while in the north of Great Britain we find something cold and chilling. But apart from this, what clear and positive consciousness in Scotland, and how heavy the veil which covers the face of Christ's Church in Spain! It is true Spain still possesses the confession of saving truth, but deeply buried under numberless human institutions. The luster of holy things divine is dim and feeble. We deny not the working of divine grace in the Spanish Church, and we gladly admit that Christ is preached even under the veil, and that His elect are being gathered unto eternal life. But for the rest, what dulness of soul, what hardening of spirit! It is evident that in that grandly beautiful country an evil power oppresses the spirits, against which they wrestle in vain,

Altho less conspicuously and on a smaller scale, the same collective hardening is found everywhere. In the Scottish Highlands the Church is much purer than in the Lowlands. In the Lutheran Church in Norway spiritual life is much tenderer than in Saxony. In the Canton du Vaud it is much more energetic than in Berne. And in our own land, who does not mourn for Drente as compared to Zeeland? Who does not know that the rural districts of South Holland are spiritually much more susceptible than those of North Holland? And who can



fail to notice the difference between sand and clay in Friesland and in Gelderland? But if we possess deeper insight and larger life, owing to the more favorable circumstances of environment and education, we should not boast ourselves. If we had been planted in such dry ground, we should probably have grown up just as thin and ill-favored.

To measure every man's guilt with reference to this collective hardening is not our business, but the Lord is the judge of all the earth. But it is our business to oppose this hardening, wherever we meet it, with the leaven of the Word, and to pray without ceasing for deliverance from this spiritual plague. Again and again the hardening, which had been upon villages and cities—and whole countries, has been lifted by the boldness of a single preacher of righteousness. It may be incurable as in Sodom and Gomorrah, which were to be destroyed, while Nineveh could still repent. But this is exceptional. Ordinarily we see the most hardened nations awake from their spiritual slumber as soon as the preacher of repentance summons them to return to God.

Altogether different is the personal hardening which, in greater or smaller measure, comes upon all who live under the influence of the Gospel without being quickened by it—who were baptized with water and not with the Holy Spirit; and of this personal hardening the apostle testifies: "The election hath obtained it, but the rest were hardened."



XXXVI.

The Apostolic Love.

“He hath blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts.” — *John xii. 40.*

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It is singular that the hardening, in its most awful manifestation, finds its exponent not in Jeremiah, the stern preacher of repentance, nor in St. Paul, the logic confessor and witness of the divine sovereignty, but in St. John, the *apostle of love*. St. John knows men whom he designates as “children of the devil,” who as such are the opposite of the children of God.

Jesus had entered the holy city amid the hosannas of the enthusiastic multitudes. All Jerusalem apparently came out to hail Him. Even the resident Greeks asked for Him. It was the hour of triumph and glory. And yet, in the midst of this popular applause, Jesus knows that He is the “Man of Sorrows,” and declares to His disciples that He is like the grain of wheat which, “except it fall into the ground and die, abideth alone, but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit.” (*John xii. 12*) Then He cried out: “Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour; but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy name.” (*John xii. 27, 28*) And immediately there came a voice from heaven, saying: “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.” (*John xii. 28*) The people that surrounded Him “thought that it had thundered, and others said that an angel had spoken to Him.” (*John xii. 29*) It was one of the most solemn and impressive signs that ever have attended the preaching of the Word—an event like that of Carmel; a direct answer from heaven.

Still under its impression, Jesus continues His words to the multitude, saying: “While ye have the light believe in the light, that ye may be the children of the light.” (*John xii. 36*) And what was the answer? Another hosanna like that when Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and which was honestly meant by some? Indeed not. When, instead of promising them that He would raise up the kingdom and deliver it from Roman bondage, Jesus presented to them the claims of faith, then they resisted Him, and the evil in their eyes betrayed the opposite of peace in their hearts. The same Nazarene whom a moment ago they had hailed with the waving of palms, they now are ready to bury under showers of stones. Jesus, seeing this, departed and hid Himself from them. And thus, on that public square of Jerusalem, the multitude was left alone. They had rejected the King whom they should have adored. A voice had spoken from heaven, but they had stopped their ears.

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Deluded people! You know not whom ye have rejected, and that your rejection of today must lead to His crucifixion tomorrow. You rejected Him, and, with Him, yourselves forever. For this is what St. John, the witness of peace and love, under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, writes concerning them: “Tho He had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on Him, that the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?”