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Sermon XIV; Preached at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, May 20, 1790

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S E R M O N S,

BY

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UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREW,
ONE OF THE MINISTERS OF THAT CITY, AND
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S E R M O N XIV.

Preached at the Opening of the GENERAL
ASSEMBLY of the Church of Scotland,
May 20, 1790.

PSALM xxii. 27, 28.

*All the ends of the world shall remember
and turn to the Lord: and all the kindreds
of the nations shall worship before thee.
For the kingdom is the Lord's; and he is
the Governor among the nations.*

THE Law of Moses was confined, by
the terms of its promulgation, to the
land of Judea: and other systems which
have been embraced as divine, attempted to
ensure their success in some quarters of the
globe, by an accommodation to local man-
ners, which prevented them from spreading
to distant regions. But the religion of

Christ has all the internal characters of an universal religion. It does not invest the mountain or the temple of one tribe, with a sanctity arising from peculiar ceremonies; but it prescribes that rational devotion which is the most delightful, the most ennobling, the most natural, exercise of the human powers; a worship in spirit and in truth, which all the kindreds of the nations may, in every place, present with acceptance to their common Father.—It does not deliver a system of precepts suited to the exigencies of particular climates: but it enforces, by motives peculiar to itself, those great duties, which constitute the law written by God upon the heart; and which, in all situations, are good and profitable to men.—It does not impress the seal of heaven upon opinions and prejudices, which belong to a particular state of society: but it reflects an unclouded light upon doctrines that are congenial to the sentiments, the desires, and the hopes of our nature; and it unfolds the only effectual remedy for that moral depravity which

the children of Adam, in every age, have felt and lamented.

The manner in which the Gospel was introduced, corresponds to these characters of an universal religion. Although the Author of it, following out the plan by which Divine Wisdom had announced his coming, confined his personal ministry to the nation of the Jews, yet he vindicated the rights of the Gentiles, by driving out those who polluted the only part of the temple of Jerusalem in which devout men of other nations were allowed to worship the true God. He often spake not as the Prophet of the Jews, but as the Saviour and the Light of the world; and before he ascended to heaven, he constituted his Apostles witnesses to him unto the uttermost parts of the earth, and sent them forth *to make disciples of all nations*. By the gift of tongues, he qualified them for executing this unlimited commission; and by the powers with which they were endowed from on high, he accompanied the words which he put into their mouth, with
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a proof of their divine mission understood by every spectator; fitted to rouse universal attention, and sufficient to overpower those considerations of prudence and expediency, which made men unwilling to embrace a new religion. There is clear historical evidence, that the first preachers of the Gospel did such works, as their contemporaries believed no man can do, except God is with him. There is clear historical evidence, also, that the religion thus attested was, within forty years after the death of its Author, known in all the parts of the Roman empire; that it had the effect of turning those who embraced it from the idolatry in which they had been educated, to serve the living God; and that the numbers who persevered in attachment to the new faith, became an object of attention and alarm to the state. These two facts, for each of which there is separate and unquestionable evidence, illustrate and support one another. The miracles done by the apostles, give a rational account of the early propagation of Christianity;—the measure of that propagation, to which no

human means that were employed appear to be adequate, becomes a voucher of the reality of the miracles; and we thus discern at once the reason and the effect of that extraordinary interposition by which the Gospel was introduced. When the Father of Spirits, who, in the beginning, revealed, by the works of creation, the invisible things of God, makes bare his holy arm in order to restore the comforts, the instructions, and the restraints of true religion, there is a likeness in the two displays corresponding to the similarity of purpose. That power by which the First Cause gave being to all things, is recognized in the miracles of the Gospel: that voice, full of majesty, which proceeds from the Sovereign of the Universe, is again heard to the uttermost ends of the earth; and with such authority and energy does he, *who is the image of the invisible God*, speak to his creatures, that *the people remember and turn to the Lord*.

After the Gospel had, through the efficacy of those means, been preached in all the world, it was announced, by the catastrophe

trophe of that tribe from which it had proceeded, as by a sign from Heaven, to be the religion of all the kindreds of the nations. The purpose of a great part of the New Testament, is to represent the religion of Jesus as that fulfillment of the law, which every disciple of Moses was taught to expect. As this character of the Gospel implied that the peculiarities of the former dispensation were not to be perpetual, the manner in which they were to cease had been minutely described by Jesus before his death; and the early publication of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which put the Christians of all countries in possession of authentic copies of the prediction, prevented them from beholding the event with the astonishment of ignorance. When they heard that the temple, where a chosen race had for ages presented to the Lord of All a worship unmixed with idolatry, was, in literal fulfillment of the words of Jesus, razed to the ground, with visible symbols of Divine power, they understood that this was the conclusion of that preparatory dispensation which,

which, although divine in its origin, and useful during the season of its existence, became unnecessary after the age of the Messiah commenced. The ceremonial law, which required various solemn services to be performed, in the city where the God of Israel had chosen to place his name, could not continue after the precincts of their ancient temple were, by an edict of the conquerors of Judea, no longer accessible to the Jews. When the ordinances which Moses had imposed were thus effectually abolished, the spiritual religion of Jesus stood forth to the observation of the world, clearly discriminated from that local system: the hour appeared to be come which ancient prophecy had obscurely intimated, and Jesus had declared to be near, when men were no longer to worship at Jerusalem; but the true worshippers, every one from his place, were to worship the Father in spirit and in truth; and the meaning of the significant words spoken by the great prophet whom God had raised up among the Jews, came to be understood by all the nations of the earth who heard them.

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Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall bear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd.

When we confine our attention to the particulars hitherto mentioned,—the character of our religion, the manner of its being introduced, and the catastrophe of the Jewish state,—we readily recognize in Jesus that illustrious descendant promised to Abraham, *in whom all the families of the earth were to be blessed*; that Prince of Peace whose universal dominion the prophets have painted by various imagery, *in whose reign the righteous were to flourish, and the knowledge of the Lord was to cover the earth*. But when we look beyond the destruction of Jerusalem, these bright views seem to vanish, and we mark with wonder and regret, a striking inconsistency between the splendid scenes which we have been contemplating, and the subsequent history of the Christian church. A religion, which is certainly fitted by its nature, and which appears to have been designed by Heaven, to bring tidings of great joy to all people,

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was for many ages despised and persecuted by the powers of the earth. After it became the established religion of the Roman empire, its progress among the Heathen was retarded by the divisions and corruptions of Christians. For a long period, it was involved in the superstition and barbarism of the dark ages. Since the revival of letters, those philological labours, which are of essential use for the elucidation of scripture; those investigations of every point respecting the evidence of Christianity, which the reasonings and the misrepresentations of its adversaries required, and those speculations and controversies, with regard to its peculiar doctrines, which were the natural result of the spirit of research that accompanied the Reformation; these objects, various and important, have engaged so much attention, and have expended so large a portion of zeal, that the greater part of those, who are most cordially attached to the interests of Christianity, have found neither leisure nor inclination to apply any vigorous persevering exertions in communicating to distant regions the truths

truths which they explain and defend at home: and the rulers of Protestant countries, occupied with the many interesting objects which demand their attention in the present improved state of society, and conceiving that they fulfill that part of the duties of their station which respects religion, by giving it the advantages of a public establishment, have generally left the propagation of Christianity in foreign parts, without the effectual support of government, to accidental occurrences, or to private efforts.—The fact accordingly is, that, after seventeen hundred years, the religion of Jesus is established in less than a fifth part of the globe. The faith of Mahomet, which has been permitted to overspread a larger portion of the earth, retains undisturbed possession of its conquests: the reign of superstition and idolatry is far wider than the whole extent of Christianity and Mahometanism taken together; and the obstacles to the further progress of our religion, arising from the inveteracy of ancient prejudices, appear to be such as the indolence

lence and avarice of Christians will never surmount.

If our expectation of this further progress, were founded merely upon speculations concerning the nature of Christianity, or upon an inference drawn from the manner of its being introduced, we might be mistaken with regard to the measure of that effect which the Almighty intended; and we might learn, from present appearances, to correct the fond hope, which a benevolent wish for the improvement and happiness of mankind had created. But if this expectation be confirmed by the language of ancient prophecy, and by the declarations of our Lord and his Apostles, we cannot doubt of its being fulfilled. We pretend not to explain the means by which *the Governor among the nations* is to carry into effect the whole extent of his gracious purpose: but we know assuredly *that the word which proceeded out of his mouth shall not return to him empty, but shall accomplish that which he pleaseth, and shall prosper in the thing whereto he sends it*: we have received,

ceived, in the accomplishment of those prophecies which announced the appearance of Christianity, and in the Almighty power which overcame the obstacles to its first establishment, the surest pledge of all that remains to be done; and we are able to trace, in the administration of *that kingdom which is the Lord's*, various circumstances concurring to establish our faith in his promise, that *all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord.*

These circumstances fall to be stated not as constituting an argument, by which we attempt to prove that Christianity shall be received by the inhabitants of every land; for no argument upon this subject could go beyond conjecture, without the promise of God. But they fall to be stated as an answer to the presumption, drawn from present appearances, against the fulfillment of that promise; and they may be arranged in the following order.

1. I observe that, although the Almighty may do all his pleasure by a word of his mouth, he generally chooses to employ means in accomplishing his purposes; and

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the operation of those means is so gradual, as to admit of a progress, in which one thing not only paves the way for another, but gives notice of its approach. In all that process by which food is brought out of the earth, in the opening of the human mind from infancy to manhood, and in those natural changes which affect the surface and the bowels of the earth, we profit very much by marking the slow advances of nature to its end: and we are not warranted by the analogy of any part of Divine Providence, to expect, in the communication of religious instruction, that haste, which to our imaginations may appear desirable.

2. I observe that as, in natural productions, there is a time of maturity, to which all the preparation had tended, so the season destined for the appearance of the Gospel, which is called in scripture *the fullness of time*, was produced by a preparation of four thousand years; during which some measure of religious knowledge was gradually diffused throughout the world. By the longevity of the patriarchs, the few simple doctrines

doctrines of that traditional religion which existed before the deluge, were transmitted, through very few hands, for sixteen hundred years. Surrounding tribes derived some benefit from the revelations vouchsafed to him who is called *the friend of God*; and if we attend either to the history of that people which descended from Abraham, their long sojourning in Egypt, the situation of that country which they were destined to inhabit, their conquests, and their captivities; or to the many instances in which a resemblance has been traced between the Mosaic system and the religions of neighbouring nations, we can hardly entertain a doubt, that the Revelation by which the Jews were distinguished, was a source of instruction to other people. During the existence of this peculiar religion, there arose in other countries a succession of wise men, whose speculations exposed the corruptions of the established systems, or whose laws gave some check to the excesses of superstition: while the progress of society was gradually opening the minds of a part of the human race to

receive the rational and sublime system unfolded in the Gospel; and the revolutions of empire were insensibly producing that political state of the world, which was the most favourable for conveying this universal religion, with ease and advantage, to remote countries, and to future ages.

3. I observe that, in exact conformity to the view which has been given of the general course of nature, and of the moral education of the world, previous to the first appearance of Christianity, the partial propagation of it has already diffused a large measure of religious knowledge, which concurs with other circumstances in preparing the world for its being universally received.

The Heathen Moralists who lived after the days of our Saviour, discover more refined and consistent notions of the Deity, and more enlarged conceptions of the duties of man, than any of their predecessors. They profited by the Gospel, although they did not acknowledge the obligation; and their writings disseminated some parts of its instruction, although they disdained to appear as its ministers.

ministers.—The sagacious Prophet of the East went further. Avowing his reverence for Jesus as a Teacher sent from God, he scrupled not to avail himself of the light of the Gospel. The Koran inculcates the unity of God, in opposition to the idolatry of the nations: it retains, amidst many licentious maxims and much frivolous superstition, a part of the Christian morality; and that accommodation to local prejudices and vices, which degrades the religion of Mahomet, but to which it has been, in some measure, indebted for its success, may thus be considered as a step by which *the Governor among the nations* is to lead some of them from the absurdities of Paganism to the true faith.

When Constantine embraced Christianity, those parts of the then known world which the Roman empire did not include, were very far from deserving the name of civilized; and many of the countries that have been lately discovered, are in the rudest state of society. But the conversion of savage tribes to a spiritual system, is impracticable. Much time is necessary to open their understand-

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ings, and to give them habits of industry and order; and it is by slow degrees that they come to adopt ideas and manners more polished than their own. Although, therefore, plans of national ambition and commerce have transmitted to distant regions the report of blessings infinitely more important than any which are embraced by human policy, it cannot be a matter of surprize to an intelligent and candid observer of human affairs, that the value of these blessings is not instantly perceived, and that the precipitancy of visionary reformers has often been checked. But a continued intercourse with the nations of Europe, will gently undermine that fabric which ignorance supports: improvements in art and science will enable the mind that is now untutored, to rise to rational conceptions of the Deity: the errors of idolatry will be rendered glaring by the approach of the true light; and in the voyages and discoveries of modern times, which make us acquainted with the manners, the views, and the interests, as well as with the geographical situation of all the inhabitants of the

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the earth, there is a preparation, not perhaps intended by us, yet such as the nature of the case requires, for the knowledge of the true God and his son Jesus Christ being communicated to the ends of the world.

4. I observe, in the last place, that the partiality, the delay, and the imperfection in the propagation of Christianity, are fully accounted for by the nature of those human means, which, without a succession of miracles, it was necessary to employ.

Had the out-stretched arm of the Almighty, which first introduced the Gospel, continued, in all ages of the church, to guard against every abuse, and to overcome every obstacle in spreading it through the world, the order of human affairs would have been disturbed, and the argument from miracles would have been weakened, because the frequent returns of this extraordinary interposition would have confounded it with the ordinary course of nature. The Divine original of the gift therefore being ascertained, the hand of Him from whom it had proceeded was wisely withdrawn; and human interests and

passions were combined, by his all-ruling Providence, to diffuse it in the measure which he had ordained. The pious zeal of many Christians, in early or in later times; the vanity, ambition, or avarice, which led others to spread the faith of Christ; the wide extent of the Roman Empire when Christianity became the established religion of the state; the subsequent dismemberment of the Empire by the invasions and settlements of the barbarous nations; and the spirit of commerce which has carried the descendants of those nations to regions never visited by Roman arms; these are some of the instruments that have been employed by *the Governour among the nations*. In a propagation thus committed to human means, the heavenly gift could not escape all contamination, from the imperfect and impure channels through which it was conveyed; and we are not surprized to find, in the long course of ages, which the operation of those instruments required, many corruptions of the faith once delivered to the saints. But the Divine system deposited in those authentic records, which
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are received by the whole Christian world, although deformed in its progress by the errors and passions of men, broke through the cloud by its own intrinsic light. The striking manner in which the prophecies of the corruptions of Christianity have been fulfilled, forms an important branch of the evidence of our religion: the discussions which these corruptions occasioned, have contributed very much to render the nature of the Gospel more perfectly understood; and the transcendent excellence of our religion becomes the more manifest, the nearer that Christians approach to that standard which their sacred books contain.

Hence we perceive an important advantage derived from the slowness with which the gospel was propagated for many centuries. In its rapid progress before the destruction of Jerusalem, the pure doctrine of the Apostles was carried, by themselves or their immediate successors, through all the parts of the then known world. But had it spread with equal rapidity in the dark ages, all the absurdities which at that time adhered to it would have spread also;

and so universal a disease would hardly have admitted of any human remedy. It is now purified from a great part of the dross: the influence of the reformation has extended to Roman Catholic countries: the attacks of unbelievers, by calling forth some of the greatest masters of reason in defence of the truth, have produced various illustrations of the evidences of Christianity; and the application of sound enlightened criticism is continuing to vindicate the genuine doctrines of Christ, from some of those innovations which arose, amidst the general freedom of inquiry, from the rashness and presumption of human reason. The gospel will thus be communicated with less adulteration, in a more rational and convincing form, to those parts of the world which are yet to receive the first notice of it; and the access which modern commerce is opening to countries from which most of the states of Europe were formerly excluded, by correcting the false representations of our religion which had been given by Popish missionaries, may procure a freer course for the truth as it is in Jesus.

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Thus we have seen that that presumption against the universal propagation of Christianity which has been drawn from present appearances, is contradicted by the general analogy of the Divine government, by the effects already produced, and by indications of a tendency in natural causes and events to the completion of that gracious plan which was announced from the beginning. The least of all seeds, of which our Lord speaks in one of his parables, although sown in an unkindly soil, and an unfavourable climate, has become a great tree. The poor, the captive, the slave, the widow, the fatherless, the mourner, have found shelter under its branches. We who dwell in the isles of the sea, sit under its shadow, and gather its fruit with delight; and experience comes in aid of reason to satisfy us, that it is not impossible with God to fulfil his promise, by sending forth its boughs to the uttermost ends of the earth. Our faith in this fulfilment rises superior to human obstacles; it is independent of the success of those means which men may devise; it rejects the use
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of those unhallowed weapons by which human empires are extended; and it rests in the declarations of scripture, with perfect assurance that there are methods of Providence in reserve, by which *all the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.*

How delightful to those who are animated by the true spirit of Christianity, is the prospect of an event so auspicious to the best interests of mankind! How pure the joy which piety and benevolence inspire, in looking forward to a time, when all the children of Adam, recognizing their common origin, shall be united by the knowledge of Him, who hath made of one blood all nations of men, to dwell on all the face of the earth; when the sentiment of religion, which is characteristical of man, shall, amidst the dissimilitude of local manners, express itself every where by a pure offering, ascending, through the mediation of Jesus Christ, to the God and Father of all; when an acquaintance with the provision made in the gospel, for restoring the virtue and happiness of the human

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human race, shall reach as far as the fruits of the first transgression; when *men shall be blessed in Jesus, and all nations shall call him blessed.*

While we are thankful to the Father of Lights for the fulness and purity in which the inhabitants of this happy isle enjoy the advantages of the Christian Revelation, let us aspire to the exalted office of being workers together with Him in the great and benevolent scheme, by which he is gathering his children out of all kindreds and tribes. The ministers of religion fulfil the peculiar business of their station, when they recommend the gospel to the attention and esteem of the world, by preaching its doctrines uncorruptly, and by exhibiting in their lives, a specimen of the divine power of those truths which they preach. Men of rank and influence act in the spirit of true patriotism, and of a philanthropy still more enlarged, when they cherish, by their example, the respect which the people entertain for the religion of their country: and the most private Christian, by discharging the duty which Jesus requires of him,

him, and by forming his children to the love of that religion into which they were baptized, contributes, in his place, to maintain the barrier which the God of truth hath erected against the progress of idolatry and superstition. The public establishment of Christianity is the light of the world, and the virtues of Christians, by making this light to shine before men, draw them unto Jesus. When the subjects of the Prince of Peace appear clad in the beauties of holiness, they display the glory and the excellency of his kingdom. The attraction of virtue, that charm which commands the heart of man, is felt by every one who beholds *the fruit of the spirit in all goodness, and righteousness, and truth*; and the friends of Jesus thus prepare for Him, *a people who shall be willing, in the day of his power.*