

CHAPTER VI

THE KINGDOM, AND THE PERPLEXING PRESENCE OF EVIL

THE PARABLE OF THE TARES

"Another parable set he before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the blade sprang up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. And the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares? And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he saith, Nay; lest haply while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn."

"Then he left the multitudes, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Explain unto us the parable of the tares of the field. And he answered and said, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; and the field is the world; and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy that sowed them is the devil: and the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are angels. As therefore the tares are gathered up and burned with fire; so shall it be in the end of the world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He that hath ears, let him hear."

(*Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43*)

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This is a perplexing parable. As we read it the questions bristle. Why, we ask, does God tolerate the sowing of tares?—an old, old question! And this reference to the "enemy"—does Jesus therein lend explicit endorsement to the doctrine of a hoofed and horned being, the satanic author of all mischief? Furthermore, is wrong to be allowed to root and grow, crowding and counterfeiting the right, age after age, until "angels" finally intervene? And the terrible climax to the story, the binding of bundles ready for the fire—did Jesus light this parable with the lurid flames of Hell? Such are the vexing questions which the parable provokes. It is not surprising that competent and conservative critics have doubted its claim to genuineness.¹

Moreover, the interminable controversies waged around the parable have deepened perplexity. The Donatists (a group of schismatics in Northern Africa in the fourth century) were churchmen who believed in purity before peace. They deemed it a duty to exclude from the church every one guilty of heresy, the Donatists themselves (so one gathers) being the standard and test of orthodoxy. Ranged against them were the Augustinians who pleaded that heresy, however unfortunate, should not be cut off; Christ's own dictate was that tares should be permitted to grow until the harvest. The Donatists retorted that the parable is a description of the world ("the field is the

¹ Even such a critic as James Denney. Loisy is of the view that the parable in its present form is framed to fit the "interpretation" which, he believes, is of a later origin. He suggests, however, that the parable itself may have been spoken by Jesus in some simpler form. But the parable as it now is, if it could be freed from controversial accretions, would, we think, be seen to possess in its insight and compassionate wisdom, the characteristics of a genuine utterance. Regarding the authenticity of the interpretation (*Matthew 13: 36-43*) there is wider room for doubt. See footnote, p. 68.

world") and not of the church. Tares may be tares with some impunity in the world, but in the church they must be handled without mercy. Books multiplied on the absorbing topic and the battle raged with fury.²

"But what they fought each other for,
I could not well make out;
'But everybody said,' quoth he,
'It was a famous victory.'"³

The story again became a bone of contention in early Reformation times. Luther taught (by reasoning whose consistency is not now apparent) that the church may *exclude* heretics but not *slay* them, whereas the State may do both since the prohibition against uprooting tares is guidance for Christian ministers and not for the civil authorities! Beza put Luther's timidity to shame; argued that the parable is not relevant in matters of church discipline and that, consequently, both church and state may mete out appropriate punishment to heretic-tares; and ended by justifying the burning of Miguel Serveto!

"But things like that, you know, must be
After a famous victory."⁴

The strife was joined again in the Erastian and Arminian controversy, continued through the time of birth of Nonconformity, and its reverberations may be felt in the present day. Often in these tumultuous years the battle has been pitched on the sacred ground of this simple story. Thus Arnot charges (and rightly) that Trench interprets the parable from an Erastian bias, but meanwhile betrays an Arminian bias of his own.⁴ We can imagine Jesus regarding these conflicts, ancient or modern, with grieving and incredulous eyes, and wondering why men should forge fratricidal weapons from His words of eternal life.

Let the questions raised by this controversy be answered categorically and then forgotten. Does the parable concern church discipline?⁵ Primarily, no!—for the good and sufficient rea-

² Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 49 ff., has a résumé of the various controversial interpretations of the parable.

³ Robert Southey, "The Battle of Blenheim."

⁴ See Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁵ Trench begs the question by ignoring the interpretative phrase, "The field is the world," and by claiming: "It must, however, be evident . . . that the parable

son that the Christian Church did not exist when the parable was spoken. Has it any bearing on church discipline? It bears on life and the disconcerting presence of evil; it is applicable to the church only as the church is a province of life and beset by evil influence. Does it offer a rule of thumb for practical conduct? No, it offers more than any rule of thumb; it breathes the spirit from which alone wise action can proceed.

Then how shall we regard the parable? We shall regard it first as a story graphically told. It is not a picture-puzzle in which to search for hidden and ingenious meanings. It is not an allegory in which every detail has definite significance. It is a story that flames like a torch to guide our pilgrimage. Perhaps it was based on an actual incident of Jesus' boyhood.

A farmer living, perhaps, near Nazareth had sown his field with wheat. He had been particular about the good quality of the seed; the poor seed from the last harvest had been ground into flour, and the best saved for the new sowing. But under cover of darkness his enemy scattered darnel over the field. Darnel is false wheat, hard to distinguish from the real grain, and poisonous to eat. The cool of the night should have abated the wrath of his enemy, and the stars should have seemed like the eyes of God; but nothing could stay the man's vengefulness. Thus, in cruel deceit, he fouled the crop. The farmer could detect no fraud while the wheat was in the blade, but when it formed in the ear his servants hurried to him in dismay: "Didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? Whence then hath it tares?" He was a man of few words and of iron self-control. He did not storm nor curse. "An enemy hath done this," was his only comment. A man of fine patience also; for when his servants were all for violent measures, he restrained them: "Nay; for if you pull up the tares you will pull up the wheat. Let both grow until the harvest. Then we will burn the tares and gather the wheat into the barn."

is, as the Lord announces, concerning the 'kingdom of heaven' or the Church." (Italics mine.) (*Op. cit.*, p. 92.) Bruce offers five ingenious reasons why the tares are to be taken as a symbol of "counterfeit Christians" and why the parable must be so interpreted. (*Op. cit.*, p. 45 ff.) He denies the parable has any reference to bad men in general. His position is thus only slightly different from that of Trench and untenable for the same reason, namely, the church, as such, did not exist when the parable was spoken, and "Christian" had not become a defined and determinative discipleship. Though limiting its field of application, Bruce's interpretation of the parable is nevertheless eminently wise and illuminating.

Can you imagine such a story racing through the village street when Jesus was a boy? Can you imagine the excited whispering that guessed the identity of the culprit? "So-and-so," they said, "has sworn revenge ever since he was 'fired' for his trickery." Years later Jesus looked out over the field of human life with its wheat and its false wheat and pondered the patience of God's dealings. How unlike the impatience of our dealings! "Let me tell you a story about it," He said. "And he put forth another parable unto them saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept"—and with dramatic application that old story, scored into His boyhood imagination, was retold!

Well Jesus knew the questions that perplex us. Why is the world so unlike God's world and so tragically like the ill-cultivated patch of an indifferent proprietor? Why are the tares of war among the grains of wheat? Why is the acreage of our national life so choked with weeds? All indiscriminate indignation aside, all wild rumor-mongering forgotten, there is laid bare from time to time an astounding lack of truth in high places. Why is the wheat so often ruinously intermingled with false wheat?

The realm of private character is hardly more reassuring. There is, in very truth, many a high emprise and many an obscure fidelity, which shine like candles "in a naughty world." But there is also the mad scramble for money and notoriety, the lust and the murder, the selfishness which first usurps the throne of love in the home and then wrecks it, the unexamined life of multitudes who appear to be dead on the whole upper register of being. These facts must be reckoned, even while we admit the bright and cheering balance. Who has not raised a cry Godward?—"Didst Thou not sow good seed in Thy field? Whence then hath it tares?"

The fact of failure in the church is even more conspicuous, because there the soil is favored. The church is a garden reclaimed from the outlying wilderness, walled with mercy, and fertilized by the blood of her Lord. When weeds are discovered in that garden perplexity becomes dismay. But the church has had her warfare. The lives cut short and the persecuting torture practised in the name of religion almost put paganism

to blush. In bloodless fashion, though not without bitterness, our day continues the strife. While ministers dispute about the name of Jesus, He Himself is forgotten. To sin in doctrine is execrable, while to sin in that spirit which is a denial of the brotherhood passes uncondemned. The world regards professed Christianity and remarks, not without cause: "These, then, are the 'redeemed.' But from what are they redeemed? Not all are redeemed from the money standard. Not all are redeemed from class pride. Not all are redeemed from intolerance and the unbrotherly heart. Pray, why do they call themselves redeemed?" Christ's own garden rank with noxious weeds provokes the sharper cry: "Good Father of mankind, didst Thou not sow good seed in Thy field? Whence then hath it tares?"

Thus the parable confronts us with the stubborn fact and mystery of sin in a God-created world. Does Jesus explain that fact? No; but, as has been pertinently said, He "does not explain it away." He gives no cut-and-dried solution to that ultimate enigma—the problem of the origin of evil. It is no irreverence to suggest that He may not have possessed in knowledge the full data for a solution. He shared our humanity in its limitations of body and mind; otherwise the sharing would have been fictitious. Mystery dictated for Him, we must believe, as for us, the odds of faith. The parable is not to be construed as though Jesus lent either countenance or denial to the doctrine of a personal devil. Whether the "enemy" of the human field is "devil," or ingrained perversity of human choice, or some other antagonism, is a question to be met on different terrain from this parable; for the parable was spoken, not to establish dogma, but to establish life.

But if evil is not explained, it is not explained away. The tares are tares. They are not immature grain. They are not imaginary. They are weeds and poisonous. They positively war against a good harvest. Whether we call the power that sows them "devil" or the wrong choice of human freewill, that power is the foe of our souls: "An *enemy* hath done this." Tares have entered the field—whether sown by Satan or by our perversion of a God-given liberty; and life will be clarified if we fixedly regard them as a hostile growth, and resolve to

be rid of them. To regard evil as illusory solves no problems. A God who, eager to create children of His love, confronts them with a good and evil choice and so fills His universe with danger, is a God who by that act fills our minds with dismaying questions. But a God who suffers His children to live under illusions is not a winsome substitute! A world of real good and real evil does at least provide the setting for heroic character, but a world in which every one is victimized by false impressions is a mad world in very truth. Jesus says of the choking weeds of life: "I do not account for them, but they are the work of an 'enemy.' The harvest of human peace can never be reconciled with treachery, hate, lust, or greed. Form no truce with weeds, and He who in mystery makes you strong by the odds you have to face will prosper your battle."

Then why does God allow evil to become rooted? The tares are not merely unsightly, or their presence could more easily be tolerated; in hostile energy they crowd out the good life. Should they not be uprooted and cast away? When we see unrighteousness rampant we are all for summary measures.

"Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn." ⁶

Then why allow the colossal misery to continue? Why abide so ramshackle an existence?

"Ah, love, could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits, and then
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire." ⁷

If we could conspire with God, we would sweep away wickedness with a strong hand and make an instant paradise. But—we are not God. We are very far from Godlike. . . .

If the unrighteous were to be uprooted, could any of us hope to be spared? When we consider the light that has shone, not once but often, on our path; and when we remember how, not once but often, we have quenched the light, can we be sure that we are "children of light" and not children of darkness? There have been numerous doctrines of election. There have

⁶ Robert Burns, "Man Was Made to Mourn."

⁷ "The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám," Edward Fitzgerald.

never been wanting those ready to declare that "few shall be saved." But when did it occur to these ready souls to be dubious of their own election? Such a one, self-assured of heaven, plied Jesus with the question: "Lord, are there few that be saved?"; and Jesus answered that man sharply: "Agonize to enter in at the narrow gate. . . ." ⁸ A proper humility will allow God to determine which are the tares and which the wheat.

"Let both grow together until the harvest"—because it is not until the ear has formed that the nature of the grain becomes evident. Many a movement persecuted in its beginnings for being "lawless" has later come to genuine fruit. A wise man will "judge nothing before the time." ⁹ The first protests against slavery were not in good repute. "Every new thing which appears in the life of the Spirit . . . looks dangerous. . . . Even Christ with His apostles appeared to the Jews and heathens as an impious rebel against Divine and human right." ¹⁰ The wild theory of a minority has grown before now into the accepted conservatism of the majority. It is well to give men and movements a chance to prove themselves. Analogies of human life drawn from nature are never fully analogous, and men are not exactly like wheat and tares. Men—to cite an instance—can change their nature under stress of experience. There is tenderness in the injunction: "Let both grow." They will proclaim themselves in the time of harvest!

Moreover, to pluck away the tares jeopardizes the wheat. A son may be worthless, but the sword that cuts him off enters the mother's soul. The roots of human lives are interwoven. None is so lonely but some one would be made lonely by his destruction. This truth holds in the realm of virtue as in the realm of affection. When has the church undertaken to uproot her heresies without uprooting also her gentleness and her courageous quest for truth? No church can adopt a settled policy of "Thou shalt not" toward others, without sacrificing several "thou shalt" in itself. Even in the region of private character (insofar as any character is private) the penalty in-

⁸ Luke 13: 23, 24.

⁹ I Corinthians 4: 5.

¹⁰ Arndt quoted by Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

flicted on violent measures is not suspended. The roots of individual good and evil are intertwined. Drastic uprooting may at times be necessary—"If thine eye cause thee to stumble, cast it out";¹¹ but even within the limits of single consciousness the law holds—the destruction of tares must come by the strong growth of the wheat, or both must be allowed to grow until the harvest.¹²

"Until the harvest"—hopeful, yet ominous words! What do they mean? That God's control is never usurped! Even though weeds have entered the field, it is not rebelliously "out of hand." His ways may seem slow, but they are not therefore impotent. Neither politicians doling out "patronage," nor frenzied preachers thumping their pulpits, can determine the destinies of mankind. There is a wise and patient law of growth—"until the harvest"! Events, though slow to occur and seemingly of trivial import, move ever to their culmination. Life has its climacteric. That which for years has been whispered in the inner chambers is suddenly "proclaimed upon the housetops":¹³

Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right."¹⁴

Life frequently reaches such a crisis of harvest. Death, the dissolving of life's "insubstantial pageant," must also be such an unmasking of our souls. The so-called good and the so-called bad may frequently be confused in the period of growth; but in the time of harvest it becomes clear that the "set" of one life, despite many lapses, is towards light, and the "set" of another life, despite many compunctions, is toward darkness.

"Gather up first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them."¹⁵ This is figurative language, but not on that account

¹¹ Mark 9: 47.

¹² Bruce limits the application of the parable to "other men" and holds it does not apply to the individual. (*Op. cit.*, p. 57.) Its main teaching is undoubtedly social, but the individual aspect need not be excluded.

¹³ Luke 12: 3.

¹⁴ James R. Lowell, "The Present Crisis." ("Poems," Houghton Mifflin Co.)

¹⁵ It will be noticed that this exposition is based on the words of the parable itself rather than on the "interpretation." There is no sufficient data for a dogmatic opinion on the genuineness of Matthew 13: 36-40. W. C. Allen, while admitting apocalyptic elements, thinks this interpretation "is characterized throughout by phrases which are probably due to the Logia." ("I.C.C.," Matthew, p. 146.)

empty of meaning. Sin lights the fires of hell in this world: why should we deny a hell eschatological? We cannot conceive of God as permitting to wickedness a permanent place in His universe. A God tolerant of unholiness is a contradiction in terms. In every crisis of character here we realize the heaven of our aspiring and the hell of our consciousness of sin. That hell becomes real in the stab of remorse, in the awareness of a gulf set between us and those whose faith we have betrayed, and in the sense of alienation from God.

"Hell? If the souls of men were immortal as men have been told, The lecher would cleave to his lusts, and the miser would yearn for his gold,
And so there were Hell for ever! But were there a God as you say, His Love would have power over Hell till it utterly vanished away."¹⁶

But would God's love "have power"? It shone uncloudedly in Jesus, but did not "have power" over Caiaphas or Pilate. That His love persists unchanged and unchangeable in the next world as in this, we may well believe; for God is God and in Him there is "no variableness." But we must also hold that human freedom likewise persists; for when freedom ends, essential humanity ends. If hell be defined as the concomitant and consequence of sin, it endures while sin endures, is eternal if sin is eternal, and ceases when sin ceases. As to the possibilities of moral change hereafter, who can speak? We may say that the Good Shepherd will seek His sheep "until He find it";¹⁷ or we may say, "if so be that He find it."¹⁷ We may protest, "His love will have power over hell"; or we may argue, "It is lame logic to maintain the inviolable freedom of the will and at the same time insist that God can, through His ample power . . . bring the soul into a disposition which it does not wish to feel."¹⁸ Some of us, listening for the soul's deepest accent

"The sons of the kingdom" is a phrase with an authentic ring. But, as G. H. Box ("Century Bible," Matthew, p. 228), has pointed out, there are many phrases which are typical of the "apocalyptic" outlook of the early church. "The end of the world," "furnace of fire," "then shall the righteous shine forth" are all the conventional language of apocalypse. There still remains, however, the vexed question of how much Jesus Himself employed the apocalyptic language widely current in His day. We incline to believe that the "interpretation" is of later origin than the parable. At least there is enough ground to doubt the genuineness of the "interpretation" and to trust the genuineness of the parable, to make us cleave to the latter in our exposition.

¹⁶ Tennyson, "Despair."

¹⁷ Luke 15: 4, Matthew 18: 13.

¹⁸ Shedd, "Dogmatic Theology," ii, 669.

“ . . . can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring,”¹⁹

but we may not dogmatize where Jesus is silent. He leaves us in no doubt concerning the cruciality of our present life. The days move toward their harvest! Meanwhile He is patient past all dreaming or deserving. His hand is stretched over us in blessing. Whether we call ourselves “tares” or “wheat,” “The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins.”²⁰

¹⁹ Tennyson, “In Memoriam,” LIV.

²⁰ Matthew 9: 6.

PARABLES OF THE LATER MINISTRY
THE CHILDREN OF THE
KINGDOM OF GOD