

SEMI-CENTENNIAL SERMON

PREACHED BY

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— BEFORE THE —

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A SEMI-CENTENNIAL DISCOURSE.

BY JOHN S. PORTER, OF THE NEWARK CONFERENCE.

"I am the Lord thy God, which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth by the way that thou shouldest go."—*Isaiah*, xlviii., 17.

"One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts."—*Psalms*, cxlv., 4.

"We are workers together with God."—*I Corinthians*, iii., 9.

"And they glorified God in Me."—*Gal.* i, 24.

THE text from *Isaiah* authorizes every Church, and every individual servant of the Most High God, to expect Divine teaching and guidance, whereby to profit. That from the *Psalms* teaches, that each generation in succession should praise and make mention of His works to another; and those from the *Epistles* of St. Paul show us, that while we thankfully recognize the fact, that we are workers together with God in the extension of His Kingdom, we should not fail to ascribe the glory of our success to Him, whose we are, and whom we serve. It is my purpose to pursue this course in what may be said on this occasion.

It may be allowed one, in the performance of the duty assigned, to say something more of himself than would be proper in an ordinary discourse. I was born of Methodist parents on the 23d of August, 1805, in the south-east county of the State of Maryland. Having been trained "up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," I do not remember the time when the Spirit did not strive with me, and when it was not my intention to be a Christian at some time. When eleven years of age, at a camp

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meeting near my father's residence, I was induced to seek the Lord, and obtained some comfort, but my faith was weak, and my comfort not strong. Soon after, I joined the Methodist Episcopal Church on probation, and was never formally received into full membership, but have been permitted to enjoy the privileges of membership to this day. Having thus commenced my religious life, without a clear and joyous experience of Divine favor, I did not go on my "way rejoicing;" yet was graciously kept from losing the desire "to work out" my "salvation with fear and trembling." It was my unhappy lot to walk in the twilight of a religious experience for the space of eight years, which is well described by Newton in the following lines:

'Tis a point I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought,
Do I love the Lord or no,
Am I his, or am I not?

I did not fail to observe all the means of grace known in the Methodist Church, and there were times when I was hopeful and tender, but much of the time I was distressed for myself, because I could not say with assurance

My God is reconciled,
His pardoning voice I hear,
He owns me for his child,
I can no longer fear.

While in this State, I went to a camp meeting in August, 1824, and going into a tent where there was a prayer meeting, and some were seeking with apparent earnestness the pearl of greatest price, among whom was a young woman of my acquaintance, who seeing me standing near, asked "What shall I do?" to which I quickly answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ;" and in that instant my heart believed unto righteousness, my affections taking hold of the great fact that Jesus Christ loved me, and gave himself for me; and then I "received not the spirit of bondage again to fear," but "the spirit of adoption, whereby" my soul cried

within me, "Abba, Father." Having now received the end of my faith, even the salvation of my soul, I felt an ardent desire that others should be partakers of like precious faith. This led me to speak by way of exhortation in the social meetings, and was frequently troubled in mind about preaching the word, although it seemed almost impossible that the Lord should select such a one as I to be a minister of the Gospel. Nevertheless, I could not free myself of thoughts of the ministry as my destiny. Of this I said nothing to anyone, not a word even to the ministers who spoke to me on the subject. Notwithstanding this reticence, in the summer of 1826 the preacher in charge of Snow-Hill circuit gave me a license to exhort, which deepened the impression that it was my duty to preach, and give myself wholly to that work. I was then engaged in business, which was increasing, and after much hesitancy between having a family of my own, and settling down to secular business, or offering myself for the Gospel ministry, I determined on the former, and married a wife every way worthy of the position, and for a time was content to devote my attention to secular affairs. But this did not continue long; my convictions of duty in regard to the ministry returned with increased force, till I was constrained to speak to my wife on the subject, who seemed to be disinclined to converse in relation to the matter. On a Sunday night, after returning from church, I said to her, this question of preaching is greater than I can bear alone, and, to have rest, I must offer myself for the work and let the Church decide whether, in her judgment, I am called of God to this particular work. To this she answered, "Not while I live." She was then in her usual health, and, so far as I knew or believed, as likely to live as any other person. In about two weeks, that beloved wife of my youth was taken sick, and in about two weeks more she ceased to live on earth. I was now left face to face with all my former indecision, and at once determined to confer no longer with flesh and blood, but to close up my business as soon as practicable, and, if ac-

cepted by the authorities of the Church, to enter the itinerant field for life. All my friends, who were also the friends of Jesus, except my venerable father, said, "This is right, it is your proper calling ;" but my beloved father, fearing I would not succeed, opposed, until I said to him, "I must try to preach the Gospel, or never be happy either in this world or the world to come." The great question was then settled, so far as I could do it. This was in the fall of 1828. In March, 1829, I was licensed to preach, and recommended to the Philadelphia Annual Conference as a suitable person to be admitted on trial in the traveling connection. In due time I was admitted, and appointed by Bishop Roberts to Cambridge Circuit, with William Leonard for a colleague.

I was now regularly entered upon my life-work. My circuit and colleague were all that I could reasonably desire. Many of the best families in that part of Maryland, as to wealth, culture, and social position, were connected with the Methodist Episcopal Church, who received me into their homes, treating me as a minister of the Gospel, while my colleague was a Christian gentleman in all respects, who had an excellent wife and lovely children, all uniting in contributing to my enjoyment.

An incident occurred, on this my first circuit, which will illustrate both the treatment I received and its effects upon the young preacher. At one of the week-day appointments an elderly man named Cook, of plain dress, in Quaker style, invited me home with him. I went, and found every appearance of comfort in his dwelling and surroundings. After having dined on the best the season afforded, he asked me up stairs with him, where he led me to a well-furnished room, and kindly said: "This is thy room whenever it may please thee to occupy it. I have plenty of provision both for thee and thy horse, and while I must attend to my business thee must make thyself at home." Having said thus, he left the room, and I went down on my knees and wept freely, being grateful to my Heavenly Father that I should be counted worthy of such treatment. Before the year had

passed that esteemed father in Israel arose from his bed one morning, and after attending to his stock at the barn-yard, called his family together, as was his custom, for family worship, and, while leading in prayer, the Lord took him, and he was no more of earth. It fell to my lot to preach his funeral sermon. The text for the occasion was, "Be ye therefore ready also; for the Son of Man cometh at an hour when ye think not."

While on this circuit I was generally happy in the performance of duty, and had a good degree of success. Some were converted and united with the Church, one of whom was George Lacy, who became a member of the Philadelphia Conference, and was stationed in the city for a term. He claimed me as his spiritual father under God. He did not reach more than mature manhood before his health failed, when he retired from active service and soon died. I was sometimes discouraged, however, but said nothing about it to any one, carrying it only to the Lord in prayer, who gave me encouragement when most needed, and when I found nothing else to say, talked to the people on the text. "We love him because he first loved us," and found comfort therein.

In 1830 I was sent to Dorchester Circuit, with Asa Smith as preacher in charge, who was as a father to me, and we had a prosperous year. Dorchester Circuit was adjoining that I had just left, and some of the people here had heard me preach before I came among them, and had given me encouragement. Among those was a young man of genial spirit and social habits, who visited at one of our best homes, where the man of the house was a steward and class leader, but was accustomed to take as a beverage something stronger than cold water, and also gave it to his friends. This was known to my young friend, who was interested in the temperance movement, and fearing for his neighbor, and wishing to reform him, left a tract on the subject at his house. This tract was discovered one day, soon after I had left the premises, and it was thought the young preacher had left it. It was accordingly laid aside till

he should return. When I came on my next round the good man produced the tract on temperance, and requested me to read it in the presence of the family during the evening hour. This was done, and the Lord made that little tract a special blessing. The dangerous practice was discontinued, and after I left the Circuit that beloved brother wrote me one of the most grateful letters I ever received, expressing his obligations to me for having cured him of that evil practice. The last time I saw that excellent man was in 1840, in the city of Baltimore, when he fell on my neck and wept, repeating his sense of obligation. I knew not at first who had left the tract there, knowing only that I had not, and when informed of it by my young friend who had made the deposit, it was not thought best to correct the existing impression. That young friend was Elijah Hurst, father of our esteemed Dr. Hurst.

Solomon Prettyman, who was afterward the founder and first President of the Wesleyan Female College at Wilmington, Delaware, was an esteemed local preacher within this circuit, and finding him a man of more culture than was common among us in those days, I requested him to assist me in educating myself, by criticising my style and manner in the pulpit, which he did only in the most delicate manner, and thereby rendered me most valuable service. I honor his character and name.

Having been on trial for two years I was now to be examined by a committee, and by the Bishop before the Conference, which was to decide whether I should be admitted to membership and ordained a deacon. Among the questions asked by the Bishop at that time were these: "Do you know the rules of the Society? Of the bands? Do you keep them?" This last question was embarrassing, as I had never belonged to a band. In this state of things my answer was, "Some of them I do, but not all; yet I think my object and aim is, in all things, to please God." For this my conscience did not condemn me, neither did the Conference. I was admit-

ted and elected to deacon's orders, and ordained by Bishop Hedding, and appointed by Bishop Soule to Lewistown Circuit, with John Bayne preacher in charge. He was a good man, a good preacher, and a pleasant colleague. In 1832 I was returned to Lewistown, with Daniel Lambdin in charge. He was a genial, amiable man, an excellent preacher, and we labored together in good fellowship, rejoicing in the prosperity of the Church. In the village of Lewis we had a great outpouring of the Spirit, and many were converted and united with us.

This closed my ministry on my native peninsula. The territory included in the three circuits above named has been of slow growth in population, and other Methodist Churches have come in since I left; yet we have at present, on that ground, nineteen preachers, where we had but six, and 4,955 members, where we had 3,191. This, it may be noted, does not include the colored members, inasmuch as they have been brought chiefly into the communion of the African M. E. Church. It may be proper to say, that since the destruction of slavery and the formation of the Wilmington Conference, which covers the entire peninsula, our church there has been improving rapidly in almost every particular.

In the spring of 1833 the Philadelphia Conference met in Newark, which was the first Conference of the M. E. Church ever held in the State of New Jersey. I was here elected to Elder's orders, and ordained by Bishop Hedding, than whom we had no more apostolic man—combining in his character true dignity, with marked simplicity. He was a model Bishop. At the close of the session I was read out for St. George's, Philadelphia, with Henry White, Robert Gerry, and Thomas McCarrol for my colleagues. I found plenty of work in the city, and many kind friends to help and encourage me in its performance. Having good fellowship with my associates in the ministry and membership of the church, the year passed pleasantly and profitably away. During the time, I formed the acquaintance of a lady of Burling-

ton, N. J., with whom I was pleased, and proposed to have her for a life companion. This proposition being accepted, contributed to make a Jersey-man of me. In this State I have filled the following appointments: Newark, 1834-5; Bordentown, 1836-7; Burlington, 1838-9; New Brunswick, 1840; Newark District, 1841-2-3-4; Burlington District, 1845-6-7; Green Street, Trenton, 1848-9; Cross Street, Paterson, 1850-1; Mount Holly, 1852; Paterson District, 1853-4-5; Newark District, again, 1856-7-8-9; Rahway District, 1860-1-2-3; Hackettstown, 1864-5-6; Second Church, Rahway, 1867-8-9; Palisade Church, Jersey City, 1870-1-2. Here my effective relation to the Conference closed because of physical disability. It will be seen, that for the space of forty-four years, without intermission, I was enabled to keep my place in the ranks of the laborers, filling such appointments as were assigned me. Four of those years were on circuits, twenty-two in stations, and eighteen on districts. In all those fields of labor, so far as was known to me, I was well received, the friends of Christ manifesting a readiness to co-operate in the work of the Master. In some places I was permitted to enjoy with the people special outpourings of the Spirit in the conversion of sinners to God. In Burlington there was a wonderful revival, when hundreds were converted and added to the Church. When first on the Newark District, at a quarterly meeting in Halsey Street, it was my appointment to preach at 2½ o'clock P. M., when the Lord made bare his arm in power, and over fifty souls came forward for prayers at that time; and the work, which then broke out, went on with great success, till hundreds were brought to the Lord, and Halsey Street Church became so much crowded as to make it necessary to colonize, when the Clinton Street Church was projected, being the legitimate fruit of that revival. William Roberts, now of Oregon, was preacher in charge, and took charge of the new enterprise in Clinton Street the next year. Other incidents might be mentioned, but we hasten on.

When I entered the itinerant work, the Methodist Episcopal Church was progressing in all the elements of strength and efficiency. Among the members of the Philadelphia Conference toward whom my attention was drawn, no one was more distinguished than Ezekiel Cooper. He was over six feet in height, with large head, high and broad forehead. His features were sharp, and a large wen was suspended from his right jaw, which made his appearance very striking, so that one having seen him, would not soon forget him. He was for many years a leader, not only in his own Conference, but in the General Conference, as well as in the Church at large.

When I first saw him, he was waning under the infirmities of age, but was still able in debate, and at times powerful in his pulpit ministrations. Though not a man of accurate scholarship, yet he was well informed, and had thought, as well as read, on almost all subjects embraced in English literature, and was called by many "a walking encyclopedia."

Solomon Sharp was a noted member of the Conference. His commanding presence, and his white, long, flowing locks combined to give him a truly patriarchal appearance, and to render him an object of uncommon interest in the pulpit. His voice was strong, and his articulation distinct, so that he could give expression to his thoughts and emotions with good effect. He did not often speak in Conference, but was heard with due respect when he had anything to say. He was a successful minister for many years.

Lawrence McCombs was an acknowledged leader at that time, and although somewhat verbose in speaking, he was nevertheless powerful when aroused, whether in the pulpit or on the Conference floor, in the debates of that body.

Henry White stood among the chief men in those days. He was a man of deep devotion, wise in counsel, mighty in the scriptures, and hardly excelled as a preacher of the word of God. He was my first Presiding Elder, my colleague in Philadelphia, and always a faithful friend.

Joseph Lybrand was justly esteemed one of the best, most eloquent and successful ministers of the Gospel, in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Nathaniel Porter was an excellent man, and an able minister. Though feeble in body, he was mentally and morally strong, and ready to attack and overthrow error with his tongue or pen. He died early, and his remains were deposited in Newark, where his ministry had been greatly blessed.

Charles Pitman was then in his rising glory, and giving to the Church a valuable life. As a preacher of the Gospel he was pre-eminent in the days of his strength.

But time would fail me to speak of John Potts, John Kenneady, Manning Force, R. W. Petherbridge, Joseph Rusling, Solomon Higgins, James Smith, Jr., David Daily and others, who were active, honored, and useful members of the Conference, and whose record is on high. But few remain who were then members, and that few are soon to depart.

In 1836 the Philadelphia Conference was divided, and the New Jersey Conference constituted, of which I was a member, and twenty years afterward the New Jersey Conference was divided, and the Newark formed, into which I fell by virtue of locality, and thus I have had the honor to be a member of three different annual Conferences, without having been transferred, the growth of the Church having made the divisions a necessity.

Some speak of old-fashioned Methodism, as though "the former days were better than these." On the contrary, I think Methodism has improved in our day. Its relation to the temperance cause shows this. The discipline on that subject, as on others, has been changed for the better. Before the restoration of Mr. Wesley's original rule, members of the church were allowed to manufacture and sell intoxicating liquors without restraint; and those intoxicants were used at the gatherings of the people, and in the homes of members socially. An illustration of this has been given, and I now add, that the decanter, containing brandy, has been set out for my re-

freshment, by a class leader, with whom I went home after preaching on Sunday. I am glad to believe that now, not only distilled, but fermented liquors also, are proscribed by the members of our Church, through the whole of our country, and elsewhere. Temperance is now understood to mean, *abstinence from that which is injurious, and the moderate use of that which is beneficial*; while the traffic in the accursed thing which makes drunkards of our citizens is execrated by all good men. in and out of the Church.

Another great advance is the admission of our worthy laymen to take part in making rules and regulations for the Church, and in all business of the General Conference. Some may doubt whether such change is for the better, but the great body of our ministers and laymen, who wish to *conserve* and *perpetuate* our Church system for spreading the Gospel, are more than pleased with the change.

Some have thought that, in relation to class meetings, the Church has retrogradèd. Attendance at class, before the change in the discipline, had *special prominence*. We all agree that the class meeting is nothing more than a prudential arrangement, while attendance upon the Lord's Supper is enjoined by the Master. To my mind it was highly proper that attendance at class should be placed with the other means of grace where it now stands. It is always progress in the right direction to *do* right, even if it be in correcting an error we have cherished.

Our discipline, respecting the support of traveling preachers, has been changed for the better. The General Conference of 1860 reconstructed the whole plan of ministerial support, doing away with the rules which fixed \$100 as the allowance of a single man, and \$200 for a married man, with specific amounts for each child, according to age, together with an estimate for table expenses, and put in the discipline our existing rules.

This was certainly a great improvement, simplifying the subject, and making it more business like. The working of the Church, under this improved system, has been eminently satisfactory. In every locality where we

have a traveling preacher, or a widow, or orphan claimant, a committee is provided to estimate the amount necessary to furnish a comfortable support; and, since the General Conference of 1876, the Bishops are to be in fellowship with others, to share with them, in due proportion, any deficiency that may exist in any part of the work. This arrangement would be complete if it were made to include all the claimants on Annual Conference funds, as suggested in a late number of the *Christian Advocate*.

Finally, as to improvements in the Discipline, the incorporation of our benevolent institutions into our Church work, under the control of Boards provided for the purpose, rather than leaving them to the action of irresponsible societies. This must strengthen the confidence of the Church, that the work will be wisely done, and the money contributed for the various objects will be properly used.

In sketching briefly some parts of our Church work during the half century, the success attending our Educational movement deserves attention. Our fathers, who organized the Church in 1784, saw the necessity of providing the means of Christian education under Church control, and put forth noble efforts in that direction, but disastrous fires discouraged them, and postponed the movement to a later day. A short time before I entered the itinerant field, the want of such institutions was so generally felt as to produce action in different sections. In 1829 we had three colleges and four conference seminaries. In 1830 the Wesleyan University was chartered, and in 1833 Dickinson College was placed in our hands; and the work thus begun has been vigorously prosecuted, until it may be said that no church organization in this land is doing more in the cause of Christian education than the M. E. Church. It may be allowed me to say, it has given me pleasure to co-operate with my brethren in this important branch of our work. In the endowment and management of Dickinson College, and in the erection, purchase, first enlargement, and manage-

ment of the Pennington Seminary I was a partner, until we of the Newark Conference—the seminary at that time being free of debt—relinquished our interest in that school to the New Jersey Conference, and thus cleared the way for the establishment of an institution of learning within the bounds of our own Conference; and of my own motion I brought forward a paper at our Conference in 1865, which was seconded by Bishop Wiley, then a member of our Conference, which being adopted, led to the establishment of our Centennial Collegiate Institute at Hackettstown. For any service I have been able to render in such matters, I would here express my gratitude.

The Sunday School is part and parcel of our educational system. At the beginning of my ministry there was not much account made of Sunday Schools, although the work had been commenced. In 1844, the General Conference appointed an editor for this department, which proved to be of great advantage to the cause generally. At that time, our Sunday School literature was meager and unsatisfactory; at present, we think it up to the times, and still improving. If in connection with our improved literature, and the improved methods of teaching, we could have our catechism in *constant use in our Sunday Schools*, there would be far better opportunity for our children and youth to acquire a knowledge of our doctrines. With our wide-spread Sunday School system, our numerous Colleges and Universities, our Conference Academies, and Theological Seminaries, assisted by all other schools of different grades patronized by Methodists, together with our overshadowing publishing houses East and West, *what can hinder our success* in spreading useful knowledge over this and other lands? May Scriptural holiness keep pace with useful knowledge.

It remains to say something of our Missionary work. In 1829 we had no foreign Missions, and our domestic Missions on the frontiers, and among the Indian tribes, had not been sufficient to arouse the Church to any gen-

eral action or much liberality. When the cry for help came across the Continent from the flat-head Indians in 1832, and the immortal Cox volunteered for Africa, then the Church was aroused to the great thought that *we are called to take the world for Christ*. Since then "What hath God wrought?" Our standard is firmly planted in Africa. In Asia we have flourishing Missions—in China, Japan and India. In Christian Europe, where formalism has been dominant, our Missionaries are re-kindling the Pentecostal fires, and many are rejoicing as the result in the knowledge of salvation by the remission of their sins; and the old Churches are being quickened into new life and activity. While on this Continent we have our Missions extending, not only through all the frontier States and Territories, but in the Southern States of the Union; also, in South America and Mexico, where we are already rejoicing in the liberation of many from the tyranny of Popery and Satan, and we are glad to say,

More and more it spreads and grows,
Ever mighty to prevail,
Sin's strong hold it overthrows,
Shakes the trembling gates of hell.

And we believe the time hastening when the Gospel, as preached by Paul and Wesley, shall not only be preached in all the world, but when Jews and Gentiles shall accept the glad tidings of great joy in much greater numbers than ever before, "and the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ." We do not accept the unscriptural notion that the great end of preaching the Gospel is to be a witness against those who reject it, that they may justly be damned; but to be a witness of God's love to a perishing world, that the world might believe and be saved.

We can only allude to the Church Extension Board, and the Freedmen's Aid Society, both of which are doing important service in extending the Kingdom of God among men, and deserve the confidence and co-operation of the entire Church.

In tracing the providential history, both of myself and the Church of my early choice—in the action of which, both in her General and Annual Conferences, as well as in the open field, I have been permitted to take part—it has been my endeavor so to present the facts as to show the Divine hand, and praise Him, who has graciously taught and led his people in all their generations. I cherish the thought that the Methodist Episcopal Church is of God. Her doctrines are those of the inspired scriptures, her Discipline, including her Ecclesiastical Polity, and the *regular consecration* of her Episcopacy, with the powers of a *general superintendency*, is in perfect harmony with Bible teaching, while her people are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people;” and the blessed results of her ministrations in saving men from sin, and making them useful to their fellow men, as well as joyful in the hope of eternal life, abundantly proves that “God is with us.” Let our young men “walk about Zion, and go round about her, tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces, that ye may tell it to the generation following,” but let no unskilled workman presume that she can be made stronger and more effective by removing those towers of observation and bulwarks of strength; nor forget it will be far more easy to mar the beauty of her palaces than to improve them.

Having had free intercourse with the ministers and other members of this Church for more than fifty years of a public ministry, it gives me pleasure to say that, in my judgment, she has not deteriorated in spirit during that time. We worship in better churches than we did fifty years ago, as we live in better houses. Our people have more wealth, while preachers and people, as a rule, have more culture, it may be; but, that we are more worldly, does not follow, nor is it here admitted. That there is more worldliness than should be, no well informed person can doubt, but we have always had to mourn over such things, and by such means as were available, hold in check, and endeavor to cure them. The Methodist people believe

now, as aforetime, in a conscious salvation, communion with God through the spirit; together with constant attention to the practical duties of our holy religion, being zealous of good works.

Having voluntarily entered this communion in my youth, and having found great satisfaction in this fellowship to the present time, and believing that Israel now, as of old, "shall dwell in safety alone," I have not found any good reason to connect myself with any one of the many organizations where Christians and worldlings commune together on matters, which may not be made known to the public, for the public benefit. Through grace I have lived in uninterrupted fellowship with my brethren; and now, in advanced age, and under the pressure of many infirmities, most of my early companions having gone before, and yet finding myself surrounded by loving hearts, who are ready in every proper way to minister to my comfort, it would be passing strange if I could not adopt the language of the Psalmist and say, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning; if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." As an Elder in the Church of God I would say in the language of Moses, uttered just before he ascended Nebo to view the land and die—"Happy art thou, O Israel, who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord!" Hallelujah! Amen!

Brethren, if there be a remnant of days allowed me, I would still follow the guidance of Him who dwelt in the bush, and whose presence was symbolized by the pillar of cloud and of fire. May you as a Conference, and the whole Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, walk by the same rule, and mind the same thing.

"Now unto the King Eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever.—Amen!"