

The Christian Ministry and Modern Thought.

THE ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE KNOX COLLEGE ALUMNI CONFERENCE, JAN. 20TH, BY REV. W. D. ARMSTRONG, M.A., PH.D.

This theme is, I hope, sufficiently wide, important and practical. It is one of all events in which we ministers may be helpful to one another in conference. Coming as a pastor with some years of experience and observation I intend to speak from the pastor's point of view. I shall be disappointed if my address does not suggest to the minds of my brethren some helpful thoughts with regard to the pastor's difficulties, dilemmas and limitations.

The professional writer, or professional teacher can deal with the questions that come before him in a full and scientific manner; but the pastor, in his treatment, is compelled to remember the limited education and the actual needs of the people for whose spiritual welfare he labors. In dealing with the questions of the day the Professor from his chair speaks to students who have received careful mental training and appear before him armed with modern text-books. The preacher in the pulpit is differently situated. What measure of attention he shall give to these subjects, how and to what extent refer to them in his ministrations is a live question, and a perplexing question, for the busy pastor of to-day.

MODERN THOUGHT is a very large word. Not a lecture but a library would be necessary to deal with it. What I mean by modern thought in this connection is modern ways of viewing (1) the World, (2) the Bible, (3) History, (4) Man. When I mention the words Evolution, Higher Criticism, Comparative Religion, Socialism, they at once suggest the living thought, the intellectual battle-fields of the present age. The relation of God to the world, the relation of God to man, the relation of God to the Bible, the relation of Christianity to other religions, the relation of man to man, these I think are the problems which this age is trying with a tremendous earnestness to solve. As might be expected from this intellectual activity there have emerged some theories and sentiments subversive of the truth we hold sacred, and hostile to the Gospel we preach.

The question is—How shall we as ministers deal with these matters? What attitude shall we assume?

I. I fear that there are some ministers even in this enlightened age who, if they could, would put down all discussion that disturbs their ancient mode of belief by the high hand of authority and force. This spirit never entirely dies out. But, I presume, we are not likely to return to the time in the Church's history when crime was easily condoned, but free thought crucified. To-day the scientist may pursue and publish his investigation with the utmost freedom. The philosopher may announce a theory of the universe that dishonors God, and degrades man without fear of fine, or fire, or imprisonment. The Christian scholar unforbidden pursues to the utmost his inquiries into the foundations of his faith. Neither dogmatism nor unreasoned authority can put down free inquiry into truth. Theory must be met by theory, fact by fact, inquiry by inquiry. The arena is open. Truth and error must fight it out foot to foot and hand to hand. Surely all the truth should ask, all that she needs, is a fair field and no favor.

II. I fear that there are not wanting ministers who through indolence would ignore the troublesome phases of modern thought. Now such a position may be comfortable but it is not noble. Surely it is not our place as Christian ministers to shut our eyes to the troubled, passionate, perplexed mental life of modern times; to sit down in inglorious ease as if nothing were happening; to sit among the dead while the world around us is all alive; to lie down in lazy indulgence and dream our dreams, while the whole world of thought is in swift and violent motion. Whilst out of this troubled intellectual element there are ever rising new problems, new perplexities; new knowledge; new ideals. Self-respect, as well as duty, forbids such a thing. So far as mental ease is concerned the minister of to-day has fallen on rather hard times. I think I may safely appeal to my brethren if it is not their experience in the midst of the unrest, the mental agonies in every great department of theologic thought and among all classes of men, that the cry comes often to their lips—

"The world is out of joint, O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right."

Permit me a word to the students before me: Young men, the call to the Christian ministry to-day is not a call to ease and comfort of any kind, physical or mental. It is a ringing challenge to all that is strong, alert, and heroic in you to arise and engage in a work and warfare the grandest that any age has ever seen. The one interesting thing in the world is religion. And in religious thinking the minister of the Gospel, of all men, should not be a mental anachronism.

III. There are some ministers who affect to despise these modern questionings and ignore them on the ground that they are only old

heresies revived. Errors vanquished on a thousand battle fields. Why should I spend time in investigating or refuting them? But suppose we are content to call them old errors revived, all I say is that for this age they are new any way and very lively, and are dressed up in a way to attract the age. And if they have been vanquished on a thousand battle fields they will have to be vanquished again. The ministers aim will ever be to preserve the faith in the midst of the actual questionings of the present day. To accomplish this end he must be equipped to meet whatever anti-Christian arguments, inferences or prejudices may be troubling earnest souls in the mental atmosphere of the present. To rush out with the old flint-locks of by-gone apologetics to meet the foe is to court defeat. A Christian minister may be well versed in patriotic theology, in reformation theology, in Puritan theology, but if he does not know the theology of to-day in relation to the errors, and assaults of to-day he cannot be said to be mentally wide awake. He may know the arguments of Colerus against Christianity and be able to show how they were refuted, he may be able to give a good history of the conflict with Deism in the 18th century, and can still study Butler with immense profit, but as objections to Christianity are coming up in new forms, presenting new facts, he should be able to present his argument in reply in the form that will most precisely meet this new standpoint and deal with the new facts presented. In the light of the great advances that science has made and the largely accepted doctrine of evolution, old Paley, with all his excellencies, whilst his main argument remains, is not the best instrument to enforce the theological argument upon scientific doubters. In the light of modern Biblical criticism and research when called to meet attacks on the Bible not from those who revile the book but from those who profess to revere it, we want something more up to date than Horne's Introduction. In the light of the fact that the press and the platform are disseminating everywhere infidel theories in modern shape, the preacher must have the antidote in modern shape and be able to adapt his arguments to special and local assaults affecting the audience to which he ministers.

IV. Again I fear there are some ministers who ignore modern theological questions from what they would call prudent and pious reasons. They say "I will preach the old Gospel and let your questions take care of themselves or let College professors take care of them. What have I to do with Evolution, or Higher Criticism, or Socialism, or Agnosticism? I preach Christ and Him crucified." And by this some seem to understand the crucifixion. (If so, who more inconsistent than Paul himself with the text). Now, it is most emphatically true that in the main the positive presentation of the Gospel and the pressing of it home on the conscience of man is the great work of the preacher. Apologetic preaching is not to be the staple of the pulpit. Our religious press is very fond of giving incidents illustrating how ineffective apologetic preaching is, or how some noted infidel was converted by a simple Gospel sermon. Take for example that old one told about the Bishop of London. In a certain church he had preached a sermon on "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God." The Bishop thought he had made a pretty clear and full refutation of scepticism. Coming out of the church he fell in with a worthy church warden and a conversation arose on the sermon. The good Bishop was somewhat taken aback when the pious warden expressed the effect on his own mind "After all, my Lord, I do believe there be a God." We are expected to conclude that the Bishop's sermon was misplaced or perhaps that the sermon was not very clear in its statements. Is this the right inference? It would probably be nearer the truth to assume the crass stupidity of the church-warden or that he inadvertently slept.

It is humiliating to find the utterances of pious stupidity heralded as a maxim that ought to guide the prophets of God in their messages to the people. The ministers of the class I am describing tell us Christianity needs no apology. I answer of course not if apology means an excuse for weakness or wickedness. But if apology means, as it does in this connection, a defence of the truth, we are bound, I think, as occasion demands to be apologists and ought if possible to be good ones. The word is a good Scripture word too. Paul tells the Philippian "In defence (apologia) and confirmation of the Gospel ye are partakers of my grace." Again "I am set for the defence (apologia) of the Gospel." The early Christians laid their carefully prepared apologies before kings. The modern preacher should be prepared when occasion demands it to place a telling apology before the people. Or, perhaps these ministers tell us "You do more harm than good by dealing with these questions. You disturb pious faithful souls by the mere mention of things. And quote Tennyson—

"Leave thou thy sister where she prays,
Her early faith, her early vows,
Nor thou by shadowed doubt, confuse
A life that leads melodious days."