

PREACHING AND PASTORAL VISITATION.

We had begun to pen a short article on the latter of these most important ministerial duties, before seeing a volume of *Sermons for Sabbath evenings*, by ministers of the Free Church of Scotland. These sermons, by some of her ablest ministers are admirable, and the introductory remarks by Hugh Miller, Editor of the *Edinburgh Witness*, are well worthy of the place they occupy.—From these remarks we have selected a few paragraphs, not calculated to underrate pastoral visitation, but to prevent preaching from being underrated, by being put upon a par with visiting. The true doctrine, we apprehend, is, that while the one is done the other should not be left undone.

There is one special error regarding this the most important portion of her proper work—the preaching of the Word—to which it may be well to advert. It has become much the fashion of the time—most unthinkingly, surely—to speak of preaching as not the paramount, but merely one of the subsidiary duties of a clergyman. “He is not a man of much pulpit-preparation,” it has become customary to remark of some minister, at least liked, if not admired, “but he is diligent in visiting and in looking after his schools; and preaching is in reality but a small part of a minister’s duty.” Or in the event of a vacancy, the flock looking out for a pastor are apt enough to say: “Our last minister was an accomplished pulpit man; but what we at present want is a man sedulous in visiting, for preaching is in reality but a small part of a minister’s duty.” Nay ministers—especially, ministers of but a few twelve-months’ standing—have themselves, in some cases, caught up the remark, as if it embodied a self-evident truth; and while they dare tell, not without self-complacency, that their discourses—things written at a short sitting, if written at all—cost them but little trouble, they add further, as if by way of apology, that they are, however, “much occupied otherwise, and that preaching is in reality but a small part of a minister’s duty.” We have sometimes felt inclined to assure these latter personages, in reply, that they might a little improve the matter, just by making preaching no part of their duty at all. But where, we ask, is it taught, either by God in his Word, or by the Church in her Standards, that preaching is merely one of the minor duties of the minister, or indeed other than his first and greatest duty? Not, certainly, in the New Testament, for there it has invariably the paramount place assigned to it—“as certainly not in our Standards, for in them the emphasis is “especially” laid on “the preaching of the Word” as God’s most “effectual means” of converting sinners. If it be a truth that preaching is but comparatively a minor part of a minister’s duty, it is certainly neither a Scripture nor a Shorter Catechism truth; and lest it should be not only not a truth at all, but even not an innocuous *anathema*, we think all who hold it would do well to enquire how they have come by it.

No apology whatever, ought to be sustained for imperfect pulpit preparation; nay, practically at least, no apology whatever, has, or will be sustained for it. It is no unusual thing to see a church preached empty. There have been cases of single clergymen, great in their way, who have emptied four in succession; for people neither ought nor will mis-spend their Sabbaths in dazing under sermons to which no effort of attention, however honestly made, enables them to listen; and what happens to single congregations, may well happen to a whole ecclesiastical body, should its general style of preaching fall below the existing average. And certainly, we know nothing more likely to produce such a result, than the false and dangerous opinion, that preaching is compa-

ratively a small part of a minister’s duty. It is super-eminent dangerous for one to form a mean estimate of one’s work, unless it be the work of a nature low and menial indeed. “No man,” said Johnson, “ever did anything well to which he did not give the whole bent of his mind.” It is this low estimate—this want of a high standard in the mind—that leads some of our young men to boast of the facility with which they compose their sermons—a boast alike derogatory to the literary taste and knowledge and to the Christian character of him who makes it. Easy to compose a sermon! easy to compose what, when written, cannot be read, and what, when preached, cannot be listened to. We believe it; for, in cases of this kind, the case is all on the part of the author.—We believe further, we would fain say to the boaster, that you, and such as you, could scuttle and sink the Free Church with amazingly little trouble to yourselves! But is it easy, think you, to mature such thoughts as Butler matured? and yet these were embodied in sermons. Is it easy, think you, to convey, in language exquisite as that of Robert Hall, sentiments as refined, and imagery as classic as his? and yet Hall’s noblest compositions were sermons. Is it easy, think you, to produce a philosophic poem, the most sublime and expansive of any age or country? and yet such is the true character of the Astronomical Sermons of Chalmers. Or is that spirituality which impresses and sinks into the heart of a people, independently at times of thought of large calibre, or the polish of a fine literary taste, a thing easily incorporated into the tissue of a lengthened sermon? Think you, did Maclaren’s well known “Sermon on the Cross” cost him little trouble, or the not less noble sermon of Sir Matthew Hale, on “Christ and Him crucified”? Look, we beseech you, to your New Testaments, and see if there be aught slovenly in the style, or loose and pointless in the thinking, of the model sermons given you there. The discourse addressed by our Saviour from the Mount to the people, was a sermon; so was also the magnificent address of Paul to the Athenians, where he chose as his text, the inscription on one of their altars—“To the unknown God.” There may be a practical and most mischievous heterodoxy embodied in the preacher’s idea of sermons, as certainly as he may embody a heterodoxy theoretic and doctrinal in the sermons themselves.

The press, not less formidable now than ever, is an old antagonist; but with all its appliances and powers, it lacked the charm of the living voice. That peculiar charm, however, the new combatant possesses. The pulpit, met by its own weapons and in its own field, will have to a certainty to measure its strength against it; and the standard of pulpit accomplishment and of theological education, instead of being lowered, must in consequence be greatly elevated. The Church of this country, which, in the earlier periods of her history, when John Knox was her leader and George Buchanan the moderator of her General Assembly, stood far in advance of the age in popular eloquence, solid learning, and elegant accomplishment, and which, in the person of Chalmers, in our own days, was vested in the more advanced views and the more profound policy of a full century hence, must not be suffered to lag behind the age now. Her troops must not be permitted to fall into confusion, and to use as arms the rude unsightly bludgeons of an untaught and undisciplined mob, when the enemy glittering in harness, and furnished with weapons keen of temper and sharp of edge, is bearing down upon them in compact phalanx.

We know what it is to have sat for many years under ministers, who, possessed of great popular talent, and high powers of original thought, gave much time and labour to pulpit preparation. We know how great a privilege it is to have to look forward to the ministrations of the Sabbath, not as weariness which, simply as a matter of duty, were to be endured, but as exquisite fears, spiritual and intellectual, which were to be greatly relished and enjoyed. And when hearing it sometimes regret-

ted, with reference to at least one remarkable man that he did not visit his flock quite so often as was desirable—many of the complainers’ sole idea of a ministerial visit, meanwhile, being simply that it was a long exordium of agreeable gossip, with a short tail-piece of prayer stuck on to its hinder end—we have strongly felt how immensely better, it was that the assembled congregation should enjoy each year fifty-two Sabbaths of their minister at his best, than that the tone of his pulpit services should be lowered, in order that each individual among them might enjoy two instead of one yearly half-hours of him apart. And yet such, very nearly, was the true statement of the case. We fully recognize the importance, in its own subordinate place, of ministerial visitation, especially when introduced—a circumstance, however, which sometimes lowers its popularity—as it ought to be. But it must not be assigned that prominent place denied to it by our Standards, and which the Word of God utterly fails to sanction. It is, though an important, still a minor duty; and the Free Church must not be sacrificed to the ungrounded idea that it occupies a level as high, or even nearly as high as “the preaching of the Word.”

A COMMON ERROR.

During a very warm harvest day, while a strong, healthy young man was sweating at his work in the field, he noticed the minister passing to make one of his visits to a sick parishioner. The young man stopped his work, and wiping his brow exclaimed, “well, I wish I had the same easy time of it, which this man has,” and then resuming his work, proceeded no doubt in brooding over the erroneous idea expressed in his ignorant and uncharitable exclamation. This is a very common impression amongst that class of the community who are unaccustomed to continuous mental effort. They little think the ministers’ labour is not so much in the pulpit as in the study—not so much in public as in private and in secret, and when there is no one conscious of it but himself, except God “who seeth in secret.” The following extract from a popular American writer on this subject, is well worthy of consideration:—

“It is impossible for any man to be a student without endangering his health. Man was made to be active. The hunter who roams through the forest, or climbs the rocks of the Alps, is the man who is hardy, and in the most perfect health.—The sailor, who has been rocked by a thousand storms, and who labours day and night, is a hardy man, unless dissipation has broken his constitution. Any man of active habits is likely to enjoy good health, if he does not too frequently over-exert himself. But the student’s habits are all unnatural; and by their nature is continually cramped and restrained. Men err in nothing more than in the estimate which they make of human labour. The hero of the world is the man that makes a bustle,—the man that makes the road smoke under his chaise-and-four,—the man that raises a dust about him,—the man that ravages or devastates empires! But what is the real labour of this man, compared with that of a silent sufferer? He lives on his projects; he encounters, perhaps, rough roads, inconvenient inns, bad food, storms and perils, weary days and sleepless nights; but what are these? His project, his point, the thing that has laid hold on his heart, glory, a name, consequence, pleasure, wealth—these render the man callous to the pains and efforts of the body. I have been in both states, and therefore understand them; and I know that men form this false estimate. Besides, there is something in bustle, and stir, and activity, that supports itself. At one period, I preached and read five times on