

HINDRANCES AND HELPS TO THE SPREAD OF PRESBYTERIANISM.

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY REV. PRINCIPAL MAUGH AR, LL.D., AT THE OPENING OF THE PRESBYTERIAN COLLEGE, MONTREAL, ON WEDNESDAY, 1ST OCTOBER, 1879.

Presbyterianism means a form of church government, but it is seldom thought of apart from the doctrinal system, the creed, with which it has been associated for centuries.

In the present inquiry it will not be necessary to dwell upon dogma, although we cannot overlook its value, and the vast importance of sound scholarship and high theological attainments, as well as of vital godliness and practical Christian activity.

In venturing to indicate some of the hindrances and helps to the spread of Presbyterianism I am deeply sensible of the delicacy of the subject and the danger of being misunderstood and even misrepresented, but I have unlimited confidence in truth of any sort, and a strong conviction that the time has come when the truth on this subject should be spoken out. I wish it to be distinctly understood, however, at the outset that in dealing with Presbyterianism, whether in the form of commendation or criticism, it is no part of my plan to depreciate other forms under which the Church of God exists. We cheerfully accord them all a proper measure of respect, but claim the liberty to prefer our own and to cling to it because, after full investigation, we believe it to embody more truth, and to be instrumental in the dissemination of more truth, than any other system. If any one thinks otherwise he is bound in conscience to leave our communion—and the sooner he does so the better for himself and for the Church—and to join the body which he honestly thinks possesses these qualities.

One other preliminary remark. What is advanced in this address is not intended to be merely local application. The hindrances discussed exist, it is believed, subject of course to various modifications, throughout this Dominion, and it may be to some extent in Great Britain and the United States, but I have chiefly in view our own country.

What are these hindrances?

1. Ignorance of the fundamental principles of Presbyterianism. This ignorance exists among ourselves and beyond ourselves.

It is only just to recognize the fact at once that there are very many intelligent and scholarly persons beyond the Presbyterian Church who know its history and candidly appreciate its scriptural foundation as well as its noble and successful efforts in defence of the truth and of human freedom; but there are also vast and increasing multitudes in this and in every other country who have never made our doctrines and polity a special study, who have neither read nor heard discussions of our principles and are satisfied to rely upon vague and inaccurate hearsay virtually amounting to traditional slander as to what we hold and teach.

They have read in some cheap story book, or popular work of fiction, or they have been told, and they have taken no trouble to inquire into the truth of the tale, what Presbyterians believe. Hence, to not a few the sum and substance of Presbyterianism is really a gross travesty upon a few of the doctrines of the Church. They have thus been led to think, for example, that we hold a doctrine of Predestination, equivalent to fatalism and which makes God a cruel, heartless despot; that we believe in a doctrine of reprobation which represents God as creating countless millions of men for the very purpose of dooming them to eternal torments; that we sincerely believe in the everlasting perdition of innumerable myriads of infants who die before they are able to discern the right hand from the left; that we delight to limit the gospel call, the offer of mercy, and the operations of grace exclusively to the elect, and actually teach that these favoured few are infallibly destined to unending glory no matter how they behave themselves in this world; that we ignore the necessity of regeneration and conversion, and openly deny man's free agency, and thus annihilate his responsibility and the very basis of all human morality.

Such notions as these, such gross perversions of what constitutes our belief are lamentably prevalent, to be met with in the workshop, in the street, in the thoroughfares of business, almost everywhere, and it is not surprising that persons cherishing such opinions should slun, or even vigorously oppose and denounce what they call Presbyterianism.

Others again know Presbyterianism only through distorted representations of certain features of our discipline and worship.

They have heard of austere and Puritanic views in favour of a sort of Jewish observance of the Sabbath and against innocent social customs and indulgences being rigidly enforced—personal liberty being rudely and unwarrantably invaded and crushed in the sacred name of religion—manly sports and virtues being discouraged and canting hypocrisy being upheld and cultivated, and inquisitorial scrutiny being made by Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, and Assemblies into what is in no sense their business, into the beliefs, the opinions and practices of men for which they are responsible to God alone. They have read garbled reports of hair-splitting discussions, angry debates and tyrannical decisions by ecclesiastics, and these they take to be the bone and sinew of Presbyterianism.

Then as to worship, as to matters under the head of the *ius liturgicum*, they take us to be a people strongly addicted to Psalm-singing in a way of our own, to the exclusion of nearly all Christian hymns, and these Psalms rendered in rugged and unfinished verse scarcely distinguishable from ill-written prose and set to barbarous music rendered in a most discordant manner; a people of inexhaustible patience and boundless capacity for listening to long, dull, doctrinal sermons, and withal stubbornly opposed to culture and the fine arts especially in the house of God, and yet not pre-eminently devout inasmuch as we are said to be not a little given to gazing in all directions while the minister is arguing out some theological question in his disorderly extemporaneous prayer. These, and such like items, constitute to their minds Presbyterianism.

Now it would be folly to claim for our Church infallibility on all the points thus caricatured, or to say that we are in no measure responsible for such perverted conceptions,

that we have done nothing to give occasion for them, and that those who entertain them are wholly to blame: it might be unsafe and unjust to assume this position, but it is perfectly safe to say of such persons that they are, from whatever cause, profoundly ignorant of the first principles of our Church and of the spiritual life and activity of our people, and, of course, such ignorance is a formidable hindrance to the spread of Presbyterianism.

But let us look at home, among our own ranks; here the same evil prevails to a very considerable extent. And we need not be surprised if people should seem heartless in upholding and dilatory in extending a system which they do not understand. Let us not fear to look each other in the face and frankly ask the question, do our people as a whole know and appreciate our principles? Is there not a large number who are Presbyterians by force of habit, by the accident of birth or circumstances, rather than by conviction and intelligent investigation? Their attachment to the Church is traditional and even superstitious to a great extent. The matter is easily tested. Our principles are accurately and admirably formulated in certain books, in "The Westminster Confession of Faith" and Catechisms, but are these works understood and mastered by the rank and file of Presbyterians? How many households possess a copy of them? Very many I grant do, but very many do not. Are they in the hands of all our elders and deacons and Sabbath school teachers and heads of families who mould the character and opinions of the rising generation and are supposed in loyalty to their own convictions, to their historic past, and to the truth of God to teach the doctrines and the polity of the Church? The books, with perhaps the exception of the Shorter Catechism, have a very limited circulation. No Canadian publishing house, so far as known to me, has issued an edition of them. There is a growing feeling which is already strong and dominant in many instances that these books are too dull, and hard, and antiquated for our progressive age and that if they are to be looked at at all they should be relegated to the libraries of ministers and colleges. Some go even the length of piously deploring the very existence and the dissemination of such works. I read not very long ago in a religious paper which is not Presbyterian but largely patronized by them an expression of profound regret that our "Confession of Faith" had been rendered accessible to the Chinese, because it had already sufficiently disturbed and distracted the religious world. Are there not many who secretly and very heartily sympathize with such absurd and ignorant notions, and even with open attacks and reproaches so freely directed of late against our standards? They have not read them, they have no time or patience to do so; but they know that they are bad and deserve to perish. Others again are greatly in love with the thought of being Bible students. They have quite outgrown the wisdom of the Westminster divines. They are sure that it is infinitely better to go direct to the fountain-head than to streams polluted by human touch. Our principles, they say, are all in the word of God, and we ignore and despise mere human invention—we are free to determine our own beliefs—we are bent upon progress and refuse to be ruled and fettered by any book made by a set of ecclesiastics two centuries ago.

Precisely so, we answer. Down with mere ecclesiasticism. Perish every dogma and every book which controverts the Book of God. Let the Bible be supreme and let us search it through and through. But do the persons thus carried away with the grand thought of original Biblical investigation attend to it? They strongly assert their independence of all helps and of all antiquity and freely denounce formulated creeds; but after that what do they produce? If they determine their own principles with sufficient accuracy to deserve to be recorded what are they doing but preparing another man-made book perhaps far inferior to those they discard. At any rate, my observation is to the effect that those who on the score of liberty and progress keep themselves intentionally ignorant of the small manuals now within their reach are the very persons, however much they may clamour for direct appeals to the Bible, who make very indifferent and unsuccessful students of God's Book; I do not say that we have many within our pale of the class now referred to, and I have no wish to press the charge of ignorance unduly. The people of other denominations often generously volunteer the opinion that we are better read in Divine things than they are themselves, and perhaps it is unwise in us to cast suspicion upon what is thus so graciously asserted. We have certainly a sort of traditional glory in this respect which it would be well to vindicate by convincing all of our possession of solid attainments; and I should be delighted to think that all our people, young and old, could pass a searching examination in the fundamental principles and even the minute details of our scriptural polity; but I cannot venture to believe that they possess any such knowledge. My fear is that proper scrutiny into the matter by ministers and elders would disclose lamentable ignorance on the part of vast numbers as to the doctrines, the constitution, and the discipline of the Church, constituting, as is self-evident, a most formidable hindrance to the spread of Presbyterianism.

II. A second hindrance arises from the failure of our elders to come up to the scriptural ideal of their office, and hence comparative inactivity among their ranks.

Probably we all fail—both ministers and people—to take in the full significance of the fact that ours is a Presbyterian Church, and apostolic in this respect—a church instructed, edified, and ruled, under Jesus Christ, by Presbyters or elders. Let us try to understand for a moment the status of our elders according to Scripture and the practice of our Church, that we may see wherein any of them seem to come short of it. Our elders are not mere laymen but ecclesiastics, as truly so as was the Apostle Peter, who said "the elders that are among you I exhort who am also an elder." They are elected by the voice of the people, according to apostolic practice, and solemnly ordained not to a secular but to a sacred office—an office which we are accustomed to designate the highest in the New Testament Church. It is well known, accordingly, that in seeking to check the pretensions of prelacy we triumphantly establish the identity of Bishops and Elders. We do so, as you are aware, upon several valid grounds. We show that the terms *episcopus* and *presbyteros*

are in the New Testament used interchangeably, used to designate the same persons, and therefore Scriptural Bishops and elders are the same—a position which is now frankly conceded by candid and scholarly Episcopallians, such as Dean Alford, Dr. Jacob, Bishop Elliott and others.

We show that the duties and functions of bishops and elders, according to the apostles, are the same, or, in other words, that the elder is officially qualified to do everything which belongs to the bishop, and, therefore, we have not two orders of ecclesiastics but one. Hence the purity, the official equality of all Presbyters, and the unscriptural character of the practice of allowing any one of them to lord it over the rest by claiming authoritative jurisdiction, or usurping the sole right to ordain or set apart others to the sacred office.

We go further in this argument. We show that in apostolic churches, whose practice we are bound to follow, there were a plurality of elders or bishops—a single congregation having had not one, but possibly a dozen bishops, all holding the same office and rank and exercising the same authority within that congregation. Hence the New Testament Church, in the days of the apostles, knew nothing of Diocesan Episcopacy. This again is granted by candid Episcopalian writers who plead for diocesan jurisdiction merely on the ground of expediency and human convenience, and who do not presume to deny the historic fact that in hundreds of instances, as in the case of the Puritans in England and the founders of Episcopacy in Scotland, their own church most unequivocally acknowledged the validity of Presbyterian ordination.

Thus in argument, at least, we vindicate very fully the Scriptural rights and functions of elders; and practically we go a great length in the same direction. Our elders constitute the local or congregational Presbytery commonly known as the Kirk Session. They sit in equal numbers with ministers, or teaching elders, in all our other courts. They are appointed commissioners to the General Assembly, or Supreme Court of our Church; and there no distinction is made between them and ministers except that by long established custom they are excluded from the Moderator's chair, and are seldom called upon to lead the devotions of the house. They speak, to be sure, not so much as clerical members, they move and second resolutions, they vote, they act on Committees, they present reports—do everything that ministers can do. Thus it is in meetings of the Assembly, elders being in no sense denuded of the functions of their office, Presbyterian purity being most fully recognized, the Moderator himself being only *primus inter pares*.

It is evident, therefore, that the difference between the teaching elder and the ruling elder is not as great as is often supposed. It amounts just to this much. The ruling elder is usually ordained by the Kirk Session without the imposition of hands; but this mode has been called in question and it has been urged that in strict conformity to apostolic practice all elders should be ordained by prayer and the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery. Be this as it may, I enter not upon the discussion of the subject here, but venture to think that the ordination of the ruling and the teaching elder as now conducted is virtually identical. In the one case we have the congregational Presbytery, or Kirk Session, composed of a company of elders residing in one place, belonging to one church, in the other case we have the district Presbytery composed of a company of elders drawn from a wider area from several churches conferring the office. The ordaining body in both cases is made up of Presbyters and the office they confer, whatever form they follow, is that of the eldership. It appears to me therefore that the only thing really claimed as exclusively belonging to the teaching elder is the formal act of dispensing the sacraments.

And even in this act he does not exercise arbitrary power and is not strictly alone or left to his own will, for according to the seemly usage of the whole Presbyterian Church teaching and ruling elders act together and upon terms of official equality in determining who are worthy to receive the sacraments; and in the dispensation of the Lord's supper the teaching elder is assisted by his co-elders and it has always been understood that his presiding in this service implies no usurpation whatever of sacerdotal office and power. It is true that the work of public instruction on the Lord's day falls chiefly upon the teaching elder, and it is right that it should be so, because this is his vocation to which he devotes his life and energy and for which he is supposed to be pre-eminently qualified by grace and natural ability and education. But he is by no means to have a perfect monopoly in this respect, or in the exercise of this function of his office. He is the recognized teacher, but not the *only* teacher, of the flock—all the elders should be, and were in the days of the apostles—"apt to teach," and it is greatly to the edification of the church when they heartily engage in this work, if not from the pulpit certainly in the class-room, the prayer-meeting, and from house to house. But is this Scriptural distribution of authority and work always carried out practically? Have we not in many instances a sort of autocracy, a one-man-power, in congregations? The minister, according to his own wish it may be, is expected and allowed to do everything and to be the sole ruler of the flock. Is there no clerical assumption—yes, and youthful presumption on the part of Sunday school boys and teachers and others who ignore the very existence of the bench of Presbyters in some churches? It may be said that elders in such cases have themselves to blame. That they are persons fit only to be superannuated, destitute of culture and religious activity and the elasticity of youth, behind the age in all respects, chosen only on the ground of their peculiar quietness and supposed piety. I am not going to discuss this point: I leave it to be decided by every one for himself. It may be that sufficient care is not always taken to draw the youthful talent and sanctified business power of the Church into the eldership; and it is certain, at any rate, that in very many congregations elders are not distinguished for activity—they have no special work in hand—there are no districts allotted them which they are expected to visit and in which they are to conduct prayer-meetings, catechetical services, and classes for the instruction of the young—they do not even believe that it belongs to their office to be thus charged with the care of souls, and hence many of the baptised children of the