

At such ministrations there are almost always some who are hungering, possibly famishing, for the bread of life; and they, at the best, are put off with mere assurances that the bread they crave is the true bread from heaven,—a something which they had never thought of questioning. And even on special occasions such attempts are hardly less certain to be a waste of opportunity. I remember once, on a public occasion, to have heard a young man, before a large assembly of clergymen and educated people, attempt the demolition of the doctrine of evolution. His statement of the doctrine, to begin with, was a caricature, and his attack on it was nothing but cheap rhetoric and noisy rodomontade. He set up a man of straw, and then thundered away at it with as much parade as if he had been bombarding a castle. The effect on all well-informed persons was anything but convincing or edifying.

Again, the pulpit, by its attempts to refute the assumption of skeptics, too often produces the opposite of the results intended: they sow the seeds of skepticism itself. To refute any kind of error, it is necessary to state the error. And, of all men in the world, religious teachers should be to the last degree candid and just in stating the views of men whose positions they assail. Statements of the claims of skeptics in the pulpit are not unfrequently the first intimation to some of the hearers that the claims are made. The very novelty of the errors arrests attention, and serves to fix them in the hearer's mind. The error is remembered, but the refutation is forgotten. Sometimes the refutation is less convincing than the error. Said a sturdy old gentleman who had listened to a sermon intended to demolish skepticism: "Well, I shall still believe in the divine origin of Christianity notwithstanding the sermon."

The best method of dealing with skepticism may be seen, if we remember where and how the gospel, which it is the one distinctive function of the pulpit to set forth, begins its work with individual men. The aim of the gospel is to win to personal righteousness,—to evolve and strengthen every noble attribute of character. In pursuance of its aim it seeks access at once to the heart of man, since out of the heart are the issues of life, and within the heart are the roots of all character. It is in the heart and with the conscience that the gospel always begins, and must always complete its work. The appeal of the preacher, therefore, should be at once to the moral consciousness of his hearers, whether believers or unbelievers, for it is only within the moral consciousness that the heart can be reached, and the conscience set to work. And yet by this is not meant that preaching should be emotional, blindly appealing to the feelings. Mere feeling builds nothing permanent. The emotions that crystallize into character must always be the precipitates of intellectual convictions.