

READING SERMONS.

This is a subject on which there has been much difference of opinion. Notwithstanding the popular prejudice, and the very generally expressed opinions of a large proportion of the preachers in the Evangelical Churches, against the practice, it seems to be gaining ground. There is nothing recorded in the Scriptures, of either the Saviour or His Apostles condemning the reading of a written exposition of the Divine word. But we doubt not their practice was, neither to write nor to read their discourses. Their supernatural gifts rendered it unnecessary that they should use helps to memory. The Synod of the United Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and the old school General Assembly in the United States, discussed the subject simultaneously at their last meetings, and by large majorities carried the anti-manuscript motions. While we would heartily approve of Church Courts recommending, or of Ministers resolving, as we have reason to believe the Students of Knox's College have done, not to use manuscript in the pulpit, we question the right of any Church Court to make an absolute rule in the case. The following appropriate remarks on the subject, are selected from an article in the *Edinburgh Witness* :—

"We do not think the subject one regarding which a sober-minded man ought to experience any difficulty in making up his mind. We believe that of the best uninspired sermons which the world ever heard, some were delivered with, and some without notes; and that of the very bad and very useless sermons which have been poured into its unwilling and drowsy ear, the one-half has been spoken extempore, and the other half has been read. O, the utter weariness of pointless common-places, monotonously chimed from off faded manuscript, kept, like the manna of old, until the worms had got into it! O, the chilling effect of watery deluges of idle extempore verbiage, which if it conveyed the gospel message at all, conveyed it as if on the homoeopathic principle—a millionth part medicine, and the rest water. It was urged by some of the majority of the United Presbyterian Synod, that the extempore plan was the apostolic one, and we doubt it not. It was the apostolic plan; but it is one of the ecclesiastical evils of the present time, that not a few of our younger ministers of the various Presbyterian churches are getting, in some part by far to apostolic in their preaching—seeing that not only do they preach without notes, but also to all appearance without "taking any thought beforehand what they are to say," Apostolic practices invariably demand apostolic gifts; and as he who would preach extempore, and without taking thought, simply because Peter must have often done so, might sink in the attempt, without knowing it; we would recommend him first to try walking, as Peter did, upon the water, as were he to sink there, he would be sure to find it out. On the other hand a spoken discourse, when of the character of those which we have been often privileged hear from at least two of our choice—men of eloquent lips, capacious minds, and careful preparation—is a very noble thing; had it not been our lot to live in the age of Chalmers, we would perhaps say, a more magnificent and impressive thing than it is possible for a read discourse to be. But it has been our lot to live in the age of Chalmers, and so we cannot say it. We cannot even say that spoken discourses are more useful than the written. God made the read discourses of Jonathan Edwards instrumental in working a great revival. This we shall say, however, that there are districts in Scotland in which the feeling against

read discourses is very strong—where a minister could not persist in being what some of our country folk term a "reader of the gospel," without offending against men's souls, and mightily abridging his own usefulness; and for a matter as indifferent in itself as the "eating of meat," a minister has no right to cast "a stumbling block" in the way of his people. "If thy brother be grieved," we would say, "with thy [read discourse] now walkest thou not charitably; destroy not him with thy [read discourse] for whom Christ died." Still less, however, would we recognize any right in the members or ministers of these localities to dictate on any such subject to the ministers or members of a different locality, in which there obtained no such feeling. Nay, it would be the believer's solemn duty, founded by the Apostle on his liberty in Christ, not to permit men to judge him in things as indifferent in themselves as matters of meat or drink—i. e. the reading or not reading of discourses. It would be a duty in him to resist such legislation as a capricious exercise of usurped power, arbitrarily founded on the human will and nothing else.

"There are subjects proper to the pulpit that require to be carefully and elaborately written; and congregations, composed of men of cultivated minds and refined taste, demand their frequent treatment. The epistle to the Romans would form a magnificent discourse, but not a discourse that could be delivered extempore. Jonathan Edwards read his sermons, nor is it easy to understand how they could have been spoken. We are not quite sure that any minister in the majority of either the American Assembly, or the Scotch Synod, thinks and reasons in the style of Edward's far famed *Treatise on the Will*; but if so we would advise him by no means to attempt embodying such thoughts and such reasonings in his extempore prelections. Let him by all means write and read. Or, if able to produce such sermons as those produced by Butler, we should humbly urge that, instead of making them spoken ones, he would take considerably more pains in the writing of them than was taken by even Butler himself. We heard, some two or three years since, one of the most distinguished preachers of the Free Church deliver to a highly taught Edinburgh congregation, part of a course of very elaborate sermons on a prevailing heresy of the time, which have since appeared as a volume; and saw that, as became the subject, the sermons were carefully written and impressively read. When listening to the same preacher addressing country congregations (in one instance in the south of Scotland, in another in the north) we found he did not use a single note; and his discourses on these occasions, interesting and powerful, though of course looser in their texture than his written ones, were greatly more acceptable in both localities just because he did not. We regarded him as equally in the right in using his manuscript in Edinburgh, and in dispensing with it in the country; and we would regard that Church Court as very unwise that would prohibit him either from setting it aside in the one case, or from employing it in the other.

"That while the average qualifications of the pulpit are not heightening and improving, are, to state the matter in no extreme form, at least no higher than they were a century ago, the general intellectual qualifications of the people are greatly heightening and improving. The pulpit has been a fixture, while the general platform of the Church has been rising. During the site-refusing persecution, we travelled several miles in the Western Highlands to hear a sermon preached in a steam-boat, and found that, while more than one-half the congregation occupied the deck of the boat, the minister had, in consequence of a curious arrangement, stationed himself with the remainder in the cabin below, and had to speak up through the hatch. It did strike us at the time that the position was, alas! too typical of what is taking place in many of the churches: the pulpit has got too much under the level of the congregation, and

it is not legislation against written or read discourses that will ever have the effect of elevating it, so as to enable it to meet the legitimate demands of the age. What is imperatively required in the first place (we of course speak merely of what man can do,) is the elevation of the standard of acquirements in candidates for the ministry, and, thorough conscientiousness on the part of Presbyteries, that rash hands be not laid on incompetent heads. What is imperatively required in the second is, that ministers of the gospel resist as their worst enemy the temptation of yielding to mental indolence. We say *mental* indolence: a thing quite compatible with great bodily exertion and ceaseless activity. A minister may preach three sermons every Sabbath, and may be most sedulous in visiting his people during the week, and may be a very sluggard, notwithstanding, living on a few stock ideas, and unable to submit himself to the drudgery of thinking out more. Let no such man, too indolent to think himself, ever expect to set other men a-thinking. There is a sympathy in cogitation; the thoughts of the preacher must be drawn fresh and vital from the fountain of the intellect, not stagnant and old, or it will wholly fail to awaken thoughts in other minds. It is no apology to urge, if it be really dead, that it came originally from heaven: the manna did so of old; but it was wholly useless on the second day. But we can merely indicate the direction in which the ailing Churches ought to apply the stethoscope. Their acts and declarations against manuscripts and read discourses serve merely to show how sadly they mistake their own case.

"PRAY THAT SERMON."

A young licentiate, after throwing off a highly wrought, and, as he thought, eloquent Gospel sermon in the pulpit and presence of a venerable pastor, solicited of his experienced friend the benefit of his criticisms upon the performance. "I have but just one remark to make," was his reply, "and that is to request you to pray that sermon." "What do you mean, sir?" "I mean literally just what I say: pray it, if you can, and you will find the attempt a better criticism than any I can make upon it." The request still puzzled the young man beyond measure: the idea of *praying* a sermon was a thing he never heard or conceived of; and the singularity of the suggestion wrought powerfully on his imagination and feelings. He resolved to attempt the task. He laid his manuscript before him, and on his knees before God undertook to make it into a prayer. But it would not pray; the spirit of prayer was not in it, and that for the very good reason—as he then clearly saw for the first time—that the spirit of prayer and piety did not compose it. For the first time, he saw that his heart was not right with God; and this conviction left him no peace until he had "Christ formed in him the hope of glory." With a renewed heart, he applied himself anew to the work of composing sermons for the pulpit; preached again in the presence of the pious pastor who had given such timely advice; and again solicited the benefit of his critical remarks. I have no remarks to make," was the complacent reply; "you can pray that sermon."

BENEFICIAL EFFECTS OF A WELL SPENT SABBATH.—I am prepared to affirm, that to the studious especially, and whether younger or older, a Sabbath well-spent—spent in happy exercises of the heart, devotional and domestic—a Sunday given to the soul, is the best of all means of refreshment for the mere intellect. A Sabbath so passed is a liquefaction of the entire nature—a dispersive process—dispelling mental cramps and stagnations, and enabling every single faculty again to get its share in the general diffusion of the intellectual powers.—*Isaac Taylor.*