Notes of the Annual Sermon Delivered Before the Baptist Convention of the Maritime Provinces

On Lord's Day Morning, Aug. 28, 1898.

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Hebrews xiii, 7-8: "Remember them that had the rule over you, which spake unto you the word of God; and consider the end of their life, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to-day, yea and for-ever." (R. V.)

Our jubilee meeting is appropriately held with the Germain street church, for here our convention came into being. Gladly we greet the mother church of the city, who, like the Roman matron of old, can now point to these other churches that have gone out from her and say with a mother's pride: These are my jewels. And gladly shall we receive this church's benediction as we go out again into the field for another fifty years of service.

But we are modest to-day in our rejoicing. Relatively we know we are not a mighty host. Our 45,000 members form only a fraction of the more than four millions of Baptist communicants of the world, and the period of fifty years is short in the history of the ages, and does not furnish events that raise the imagination to the highest point.

But if the occasion thus viewed is not imposing to the stranger, neither does the stranger intermeddle with our joy. For to us this day is full of tender interest and sacred associations. We come up as representatives of churches in which we have been taught from childhood the truths of our holy religion in which we have had our profoundest experiences, in which the associations of home have been hallowed by the Christian spirit, and in which we have received the ideal, the stimulus and the hope we cherish for ourselves and for the world. Christianity is to the Christian so nearly identical with life that festivals like the present are to him highly significant.

For they always point to the past and to the future and affirm the value of the present. They show that while men pass away the institutions that spring from the religious impulse and embody great moral and religious truths live on through the ages; that while the founders are removed their work remains and the memory of the sacrifices and toils of their founders becomes an inspiration and a directing power to those who take up the unfinished tasks and seek to cherish the visions of the past. Thus our faith goes back to the Christ who was from the beginning, and while our hope goes on to the Christ who is to come, the love that binds us to Christ who is, gives unity to life and strength for service. Thus Christ grows more precious and life itself sweeter since He is in it all; man is magnified by the divine regard.

The text is in harmony with these sentiments. It commands us to honor those that had the rule over us, that spake unto us the word of God, and it exhorts us by virtue of the issue of their life to imitate their faith which was the source of their word and works, to have indeed the same life, as is our privilege, since we have the same Christ whose power and purpose made them what they were. They did not exhaust His power: He is the same now to inspire, to direct, to bless.

In taking this retrospect and outlook we must consider not only the Convention as an organization, but the churches and interests for which it in large measure stands.

As to the past there are at once many questions that suggest themselves. We would like to know what the Baptists of these provinces were fifty years ago in spirit and belief, in numbers and culture, in wealth and wisdom, in zeal and effort, in preaching and praying power, in faith and faithfulness, in systematic work of the churches, in discipline and teaching, in their views of missions and of their relations to moral questions, to government, to other Christians. Where were their principal churches? Who were their trusted ministers? How well were they supported? Did these Baptists have opposition from without? Any dissensions among themselves? Did they look forward to this day or did they simply work in their own time as duty called, regardless of issues? Was their family life more devout than ours? Did they know their Bibles better than we know ours?

To these and other enquiries that would naturally arise, a full answer cannot be given in a single sermon, but we speak now of:

I. Some respects in which we differ from the Baptists of fifty years ago;

II. Some respects in which we are the same;

III. Some of the means by which the changes have been made and the significance of those changes for us; and

IV. Our enlarged opportunities.

How we differ from Baptists of fifty years ago.

(1) We have more ministers than they had, as well as a larger attendance at our convention of other members. In 1846 they had 90 ordained ministers; now we have, according to Year Book for 1894, 228 ordained ministers. As the activity and progress of a denomination are clearly connected with its ministry, we can see the meaning of this advance in numbers. The 90 ministers of 1846 would be unequal to the demands of our field now. At the same time it may be noted that the number of ministers is relatively not so great now as in 1846. Then we had an ordained minister to 157 communicants; now we have 1 to 197 members. We have received a number of preachers from abroad, but we have furnished a far greater number to churches in other lands.

(2) We differ in the number of churches. In 1846 we had 169 churches in 1894 we had 400. The average membership of the churches in 1846 was about 84; in 1894 it was 112. The number of churches has increased about as fast as the number of ministers.

If there be cause for joy in the light that shines from our churches we must be thankful to-day that the number of golden candlesticks has been more than doubled.

(3) Our aggregate membership is not what theirs was. In 1846 they numbered 14,177, in 1894 we had 45,100 on our records. In 1846 we had one communicant for about 34 of the population of these maritime provinces; in 1894 we had one for about every 19 of the people. While the population increased about 80 per cent, the Baptist membership increased about 218 per ct. or more than 2 1-2 times as fast. I know that a denomination's power in the world does not depend wholly upon its numbers. The force exerted by the individual member multiplied by the number of members will give the power of the body; so that if the average character for piety, activity, strength be low, the sum total will be small. But religiously considered it must be remembered that this increase has been made not by the patronage of a state church, or because we possessed great wealth or political power or the attractions of fashionable life; it has not been secured by the preaching a doctrine of works pleasing to the human heart; but it has been made by the plain declaration of truths that humble human pride, by the voluntary profession on the part of every member of a personal faith in Christ and a public avowal of that faith in baptism. Moreover the increase is not the result of the coming of Baptists from abroad; on the contrary the exodus of our members has been large, so that the number added has been greater than would appear from our present membership.

Sometimes our increase in numbers is contrasted with our supposed failure to advance in proportionate power. We should be grateful today that our numbers are not what they were in 1846; perhaps we should mourn that through our want of faith and faithfulness they are not more.

(4) We are in advance of our people in 1846 in the systematic work of our churches, the organized efforts of the denomination and in general standing of the body.

Our pastors are better supported and able to give their time more fully to the churches; our churches are more continually supplied with preaching; more of the members engage in some form of Christian work. The Sunday schools in New Brunswick, for example, have increased from 37 in 1846 to 168 in 1894, or more than four-fold, while the number of scholars is nearly eight times what it then was.

The Women's Mission work has become a large factor in our Foreign Missions and is valuable not only for the money raised and activity promoted, but for the power of Christ it reveals by showing elements of life for the race that otherwise had not been discovered.

The Young People's movement, also, has the promise of a fuller knowledge and so the condition of a deeper piety for the future.

In relation to the public, our power and therefore our responsibility must be greater. Our educational and missionary operations have been so far successful that our fellow citizens and members of other faiths properly look to us for more services for the public. In all these respects—in the number of our ministers, our churches, our entire membership and our efficiency and conditions of influence—we must admit we have changed since our brethren assembled here in the first meeting of the Convention.

II.—Secondly, we note a few points in which we are practically unchanged. The denomination has a personality of its own and retains its characteristics through all the changes incident to growth. The unfolding of its life does not destroy its identity; its progress does not interfere with its stability.

Now the characteristics of a religious body are its message, its ideals, its spirit and the strength of its personality; its power is largely its ideals multiplied by its personality. We therefore ask (1) What was the ideal, as revealed by its theology, of our people 50 years ago, and how far is it unchanged now?

Probably what was said by an able Baptist of the United States concerning our brethren in the republic during the hundred years 1776 to 1876 might be said of our convention during the last 50 years: "Baptists have reverenced the Bible as the one inspired source and final test of Christian doctrine. They have declared with one voice their purpose to rely upon the Holy Scriptures for their knowledge of the way of life. Here and there a man has been tossed for a time on the billows of doubt. But instances of the latter kind have been extremely rare, and with almost no exception our churches have been served by ministers believing in the full inspiration and supreme authority of the Bible, and the churches have been in accord with their pastors."

From the same author we quote again: "For they (the Baptists of the United States) believed one hundred years ago in a triune God, the Creator, Upholder and Sovereign of the Universe; and they believe in the same now. They believed then in the complete alienation of mankind from God through the fall; in the divine-human personality and vicarious death of Jesus Christ; the sufficency of the atonement made by Christ for the salvation of all mankind, if they will accept it; in regeneration by the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the word and according to the election of grace; in the preservation of all regenerate souls, by the grace of God through faith unto eternal life, and in the final rejection and eternal punishment of all who will not submit to Christ; and they believe in the same now.

"They believed then in Christian baptism as being the immersion in water of those who have faith in Christ, into the name of the triune God; in the Lord's Supper as an ordinance to be observed by the churches of Christ, in commemoration of his vicarious death, through which alone they have life; in a Christian church as being a society of persons baptized on profession of their faith and associated together for the worship of God, the observances of Christian ordinances, and the spread of the Gospel; in the independence yet fraternal fellowship of the churches and in pastors and deacons as the proper officers of the Christian church; and they believe in the same now."

This comparative uniformity of doctrine has not been secured by stress of creeds professed or ecclesiastical discipline. The Bible has been put into each minister's hand and he has been told to go and to speak to the people "all the words of this life." If our pastors now have the same doctrinal basis underlying their sermons as gave strength to the words of Dr. Crawley, Dr. Tupper, Joseph Crandall, Samuel Robinson, Dr. Spurden, Theodore Harding, I. E. Bill and the rest, it is because they preach Christ and he is the same forever.

The preaching of such a gospel the world still needs. Printing will not displace it; civilization will not outgrow it. The world will continue to need it and will use it and never in vain.

(2) In the distinctive principles, so called, there is but slight change from the doctrines of fifty years ago. Here again I quote a concise presentation of their views:

They have preached (a) That the Kingdom of Christ is spiritual and the subjects of it persons who have been renewed by the Holy Spirit and made obedient to the truth. This is the distinctive principles of Baptists, having more to do with their existence as a denomination than any other. (b) That believers in Christ are the only persons entitled to any Christian ordinance or to membership in any Christian church. This they hold because faith in Christ is the direct and proper evidence of regeneration and because it was made prerequisite to baptism by the apostles.

(c) That Baptism and the Lord's Supper are symbolical rites, expressing truth by forms of action, and on this account dependent for their value upon a careful observance of the prescribed forms and their order of sequence. Hence they believe that no other act can be substituted for immersion in water, without changing in some degree the meaning of the sacred ordinance by which one puts on Christ before the world and testifies that he has died to sin and risen to a new life. Hence, too, they believe that no order of observance but baptism first and the Lord's Supper afterwards gives to these sacred rites their intended significance, the former symbolizing one's entrance into fellowship with Christ, and the latter one's enjoyment of that fellowship. With these convictions, they deem in their duty, both to the Lord and to the Christian world, to keep the ordinances as they were delivered to the first churches by the holy apostles.

For the Christian world cannot afford to lose any part of the truth meant to be taught by these rites. That truth is very pure and vital. It may be called the heart of the Gospel. Properly administered, these two ordinances represent the Christian's belief in the atonement of Christ as the source of regeneration, sanctification, and eternal life.

These truths have not been held simply that they might be believed but that men might be saved by believing them. And they are preached now with the same sublime purpose as gave them power in the days long past. We are the children of our denominational fathers.

III. Now let us note some of the causes of the progress made.

(1) First among these causes must be named the power of the truth declared. As Phillips Brooks has said: "Error is always weak however strong it looks and truth is always strong however weak it looks." Our preachers had no reputation as the representatives of a state religion or as accredited representatives of ecclesiastical courts. Their power lay in the truth they had to preach. They knew something of God and they told it, and God honored His word; it became the sword of the spirit. Moreover the Bible in the hands of the people could be appealed to in evidence. Their influence was largely due to the correspondence of their preaching with the plain teaching of Scripture and the ability of the people to see that correspondence.

And the practice of the churches as to the ordinances and the free action of the churches under our polity have increased the growth.

(2) The continued work of the churches has been the principal means of advancement. A church in a community exercises a potent influence on the intellectual life by the repeated setting forth of the highest, most important, most practical subjects that has ever challenged human thought. The worship, the study of the truth, the teaching it secures, the literature it circulates, all stimulate thought and inquiry. The opposition to the Bible ever promotes mental activity. An active, efficient church is as effective in promoting intelligence in a community as a college is in a town. The social influence it wields is mighty. It brings into close fellowship the rich and the poor, the cultured and the ignorant, the people of all classes, and out of diverse elements molds a society that is dominated by the best ideas. The moral power of the church is recognized as determining the ethical standard, so that the church is held responsible for the moral education of the people. And to the church is left the instruction of all in spiritual matters.

These elements of life united in an organization that is firm in its principles and flexible in its administration attract the multitude, and as these churches have been at work all these years the people have gathered to their banners. Faithful pastors whose lives have been continual sacrifices for Christ and their brethren, have proved the doctrine all divine. These ministers have so lived and taught this fifty years and are so doing today as truly as in the past.

The lesson out of the growth of fifty years is, that we should have more faith in the work of the church. No other force can be compared with it for permanent and faithful results. Considering the issue of the life of our fathers in this respect, let us imitate their faith and ability by the exhortation of Paul to the church of Corinth to be steadfast, immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as we know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord.

(3) Another source of power has been the union of the churches for religious effort. The organizations of the body with the work of their boards and committees have been of the greatest service in promoting large views of the gospel in its relation to men.

If the enterprises proposed have often been such as to stagger faith, they have ultimately been the greatest faith strengtheners for they have shown what Christ can do with the few things entrusted to Him. The burdens have been such as to give a new sense of the divine power as linked with the human. Thus our necessities have cultivated the grace of giving and developed a power among the unordained membership that has been a source of power. We need to know one another better if we are to work together in one great cause. Large works are impossible to us without strong organization to persist in operations. As in the economic world the mountains can be tunnelled, the great railways built, the heavy mining operations undertaken only by large resources, generally by the united forces of many, so the world can be evangelized only by the united efforts of the Lord's hosts. Our union has been our strength, and often the want of it has been our weakness.

The impulse that brought our fathers together in one convention was, we believe, of God, and by it the work has been accomplished that else had been impossible. Sporadic efforts will do something; continuous effort alone is adequate, and this alone can be secured by the union of many.

Dr. Crawley's sermon at the organization of this convention was upon the union of God's people and upon the convention as the means of promoting it, and it might be repeated today. As our denominational activities increase the management of them becomes more difficult and intrinsically important.

We might on this jubilee occasion ponder some of the words spoken by the late President Anderson of Rochester university at the jubilee of the A. B. H. Missionary society: "For our work we need a constantly increasing expenditure of administrative power. Our mission fields, both at home and abroad, are so vast, and the instrumentalities are so manifold and complicated, that they need as great a combination of capacity, experience, breadth of outlook and force of will as are required for the command of an army or the government of a nation. Our boards of management should combine every variety of intellectual and practical power.

"On the other hand, the power entrusted to the mission boards should be exercised with the greatest delicacy, tenderness and caution. The largest freedom of individual action should be given, which can be made consistent with the duties required of those who from their position can survey the whole field of action and become cognizant of those limitations and conditions which the good of the whole imposes upon the activity of every part.

"Divine guidance alone can enable boards to strike the golden mean between despotic paternalism and a laxity of administration which would be a virtual breach of trust."

These leaves from the books of our brethren in the United States may be read by us with profit if we are led to give a higher place in our regard to the work of our body as a whole and to accord to those on whom we place our burdens the intelligent support their work requires.

(4) The greatest source of our strength has been the presence and power of our unchanging Lord. He is the same in His blessed activities as in His divine attributes; He still walks among the golden candlesticks, His eyes like a flaming fire, love's holy fire. His work in the past is His oath to work now. He never hastens, but he never rests, and we are to give Him no rest until he makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth. He was with our fathers in spite of their infirmities with which they were compassed and He can bless us in spite of ours. This He has promised and let Him be true though every man be a liar.

IV. So much for the past. What of the future? Christ makes all things new and even memory of the past is turned into activity and power for service. The text says: Remember them that spake unto you the word of God, and, considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith. We have seen that the issue of their life, was great; we have the same Christ, the author of their faith and the object of it: we therefore may come to the like issue of life.

First in what spirit shall we approach the future? Shall it be in the same spirit our fathers possessed? They were stern Puritans, men who held the obligation of duty—who wrought in obedience to the divine command.

We might say of our denominational ship:

"We know what master laid thy keel,
What workmen wrought thy ribs of steel,
Who made each mast, and sail, and rope,
What anvils rang, what hammers beat,
In what a forge and what a heat
Were shaped the anchors of thy hope."

In the full sense of a personal God to whom they were bound by the strongest ties our fathers wrought. They thundered at the conscience and summoned men to surrender to Christ. Life was to them obligation. It was largely life as an obligation that made them what they were. They must obey God rather than men; they must be obedient to Christ.

And this spirit we need now, loyalty to Christ, to His doctrine, His spirit, His services—He is the same. "He is law as well as truth; righteousness as well as revelation" We must hold fast to these sound words.

Others feel the need of His spirit. At the celebration of Harvard's 250th year, one of her learned professors used these words, which, coming from such a source and at such a time, may be used here: "In the soul, as in the Bible, the law must precede the Gospel. The higher grades of spontaneous virtue are rooted in the disciplined sense of duty. They do not grow on duty, they grow out of it. To reach them independently is but trying to gather the fruits of life without nourishing the roots of life. It was a hard, stern view of life that prevailed among the Puritans, fostered by their struggles, their poverty and their creed. But what a courage, endurance, and optimism it bred. These men never despaired of their country or their race or of the final purposes of God.

And what, on the other hand, is this new other curious phenomenon which we now witness among the cultivated—this refined and gentle pessimism, this faith that the world is bad and this encrusting reliance on the solaces of art amid the wreck of hope, as though, while things must be evil, it was comforting that they were still beautiful? It is once more because so many men are now thrown into the midst of the opportunities of life before they have felt the obligations of life. What they need is a wholesome reinforcement of Puritan discipline, a healthier friction with reality. "Certainly the Puritans belonged to the hard church, the body of those whose faith is rigid, dogmatic, authoritative, obligatory." But a kindred peril beets the modern world. It is the danger of falling into the ranks of what we must call the "soft church"—soft, because instead of faith it has a mush of sentiment, with no vertebrated thought or rigid ethics with the nature of a mindusk rather than with the nature of a man. It is tolerant toward other beliefs because it has no strong belief of its own. It is broad, but thin. It calls itself liberal, when it is only spiritually indolent, and is liberal only because it is soft. The soft church thinks religion is to be had without effort, but while a man has to work to be rich or learned he ought somehow to get his religion easily. It is fond of quoting that God can be had for the asking, as though that asking for God did not mean all the wrestling and waiting which the Puritan religion knew so well. Or, for some renewal of a more strenuous faith amid this world of religious opportunity which opens so easily before us in our day! There never was a time which needed more a background of the Puritan spirit. We need in our business morals a sterner sense of the fear of God. We need in our home life a renewed simplicity. We need in our religion a revival of discipline and responsibility."

(2) But the spirit of law is not all; it is not enough. Our fathers had more. Grace and truth have come for the Christian. Now we have the freedom of sons, and are surely to ask not "What must we do, but what may we undertake for Christ?" Life, the Gospel, our fellow men, the world, our own country call to us to expend our energies on them;—these are our golden opportunities purchased for us by our Saviour. In the spirit of loving obedience we are to use these privileges.

(3) The opportunity we have toward the Gospel itself is to get a larger, deeper view of it. The faith of the past does not require us to repeat the words in which that faith was uttered. The revelation is the same as Christ is the same; but our apprehension of that truth is perpetually changing. As the heavens and the earth are the same and yet modern science makes them new, so the Bible must be interpreted by each generation in the light and life of that generation. It will not do to present a system of theology that is the result of the thinking of a former generation and in the words of that generation. The words of Christ are not mere form; they are spirit and life, and to have their due power they must enter into the life of today. The preacher is to translate the truths of revelation into the thought of his own time. To do this he must think with his time and for it. We do not want to change the Gospel, but we want to make it clear in the forms of thought of our time. The faith of the fathers requires us to speak to our own generation as they spoke to theirs and to use such methods in our work as will accomplish that purpose, be they old or new.

(4) It is our opportunity to recognise our relation to our fellowmen. Our fathers emphasized the doctrine of justification by faith, the relation of the individual soul to God. We must hold to this and add the emphasis of the second commandment of duty to our neighbors. It is like the first in breadth and importance. Only in keeping both can we keep either. The movement of thought in the modern democracy; the placing of political power in the hands of the people opens to us the way to a fuller application of the Gospel than was heretofore possible—an application for which our doctrines and church polity well qualify us.

(5) Our faith is to be enlarged so far as to take in the world. After all the success we have seen in preaching the Gospel, it is scarcely faith to go on in the beaten tracks of the past. It is only common business sagacity. Faith for us only begins when we think of evangelizing the nations beyond; and we shall be proved faithless if the word of God only comes to us and does not also come out from us to the multitudes.

We need a new conception of Christ that we might have a new conception of His blessings for men.

(6) In order to reach the regions beyond, we need to see the relation of our religion to our own country. We cannot think of our denomination and what it is to stand for without thinking of our country. As Jerusalem was dear to David, so is our country precious to us, not because of its resources and its glory, but because it in some way is to enable us to get a new vision of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He hath made of one blood all nations of the earth and fixed their habitations that they might feel after God. It is the conviction that in modern life, the nation is, in God's thought, to be the making place of Christian men that makes Canada sacred to us. It is because we love our country and believe that only the Gospel can make it truly prosperous that we desire the Baptist cause to flourish. For a mere name we care nothing; for the life involved we care everything. We know that if wealth is to be accumulated, on which depends in part the future of our land, it can only be by a people industrious, intelligent and moral, and we know that the Gospel guarantees these qualities. We know that in our young country we need "constructive law and formative force, and we believe that" from the spirit of the Gospel in the hearts of believers has sprung all that is noblest and purest in our modern civilization. "The sanctity of law must be observed and we are told that "the public and private laws of our land are at bottom nothing but principles of Christian ethics, which by the thought and sacrifice of centuries have been crystallized into clear and definite formulas. Law rests upon public and private morality; and there is no stable foundation for public and private morality, but a pure religion springing from the fear and love of a holy God. All history shows that the religion of Christ is the only agency which has been effective in rejecting the moral malaria from the history of mankind."

We may say of Canada what Lord Erskine said of the mother-land: "The religious and moral sense of Great Britain is the great anchor which alone can hold the vessel of the state amid the storms which agitate the world."

If we can establish and maintain churches in the growing sections of the West, as well as in the older provinces; churches that reveal the life of Christ, we shall do our utmost for the land we love with all our hearts and souls. O may we be able in this Jubilee season to get some glimpse of Him in whom is the life, that shall enable us to see His working in all the past as the guarantee of His working on to the distant end.

The eternal step of progress beats
To that great anthem, calm and slow,
Which God rehearse.

Take heart! the waster builds again,
A charmed life old Goodness hath;
The tares may perish, but the grain
Is not for death.

God works in all things; all obey
His first propulsion from the night;
Wake thou and watch! the world is gray
With morning light.

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Consulted a Doctor

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