

# The Presbyterian Review.

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Toronto, February, 1, 1894

## A Powerful Pulpit Weapon.

THE first place is given in this month's *Homiletic Review*, to an article of more than passing interest by J. Spence Kennard D.D., of Chicago, on "The use and abuse of Wit and Humour in Preaching," a paper in which, in addition to an able treatment of the subject in hand, are to be found many interesting allusions to the place and power of the pulpit itself, as for instance in the opening sentence:—Among the forces of society, the pulpit is an illustration not only of the survival of the fittest, but of the best. When we consider how much it has had to contend with, both from within and without, in the struggle for existence, we are constrained to admire its inextinguishable vitality as an institution. The preacher to-day has a larger constituency, a more respectful and lively hearing than ever before, and this in spite of the powerful rivalry of the press, which so many declare has superseded the pulpit and stolen its glory. As a rule the preacher of to-day is more free, and natural, and human, and, indeed, more vigorously religious than the average minister of a century ago; to which he adds a broader culture and larger knowledge of the world and men. But he has by no means broken every fetter from his limbs, nor seized every weapon at hand, nor impressed his work upon society as broadly and deeply as he might if he would heed some patent facts concerning audiences and their susceptibilities. The aim of the pulpit is broad and comprehensive. Its scope is not limited by its chief objective point, the proclamation of the Gospel. Its ethical function, as well as its evangelism, calls for pungent common sense, touches of nature which "make the whole world kin," the wit as well as the pathos of men. While its fulcrum is the cross, its leverage extends to every form of folly and sin, to every phase of human experience.

While therefore, he says, wit and humour have no entrance upon the holy of holies of our faith, they are not excluded from the courts of Christian ethics; and they may work as efficiently for social purification and reform from the pulpit as they do from secular literature, or the platform. It is both legitimate and sanative Dr. Kennard holds to make sin appear not only grim and ghastly, but ludicrous as well. For wickedness, while it has an awful and repulsive side, is also a monstrous absurdity; to the whole moral order it is a hideous

caricature. The transgressor builds his house on quicksand and of ice for granite, heals his wounded conscience with shin plasters, breaks through a hedge to snatch forbidden fruit and lands in a nest of serpents, chases jack-o'-lanterns to flounder in the bog, and gambles with the devil, who mocks while he fleeces him. What more legitimate work than to make sin appear incarnate folly, to be laughed out of countenance and hooted from the court of common sense.

Among the distinguished preachers in every generation who made use of wit and humour in the pulpit, Dr. Kennard gives: Chrysostom, Latimer, South, Berridge, Sydney Smith, Rowland Hill, Beecher, Spurgeon, Moody, and McNeil.

But he recognizes the danger that might arise unless this weapon was wisely handled, and he finds that the prejudice against wit in the pulpit is largely due to its abuse. There is a dangerous tendency for the humorous to usurp more and more of a man's thinking if it is native to him and much indulged; and as there are few things more secretly gratifying to a speaker than the rippling smiles and significant nods of his hearers, so the temptation grows to a larger indulgence in what awakens that sort of response. It is a question whether a majority of speakers are not more gratified with a reputation for wit than wisdom. Instances are not rare of men with whom the habit of facetiousness, satire, punning, grotesque allusion, and mirth-provoking anecdote has grown, all unconsciously, till it has weakened the unity, authority, and usefulness of their preaching. The restraining influence of conscience and spiritual earnestness ought to prevent such a result. "I wonder, Mr. Spurgeon," said an old respected minister to that incomparable preacher, "that you should allow yourself such freedom and discredit your sacred calling by making so many jokes in the pulpit." "Ah," said the preacher with a sigh and a twinkle, "you would not wonder if you knew how many more I kept to myself." It is just this self-control that saves the wise and witty man from the bathos into which the witty but unwise man precipitate themselves.

The true preacher will never lose sight of the tremendous and eternal issues of his calling; will never forget that his mission is an embassy from a throne of infinite majesty and love to those who, in endless caravan, are passing through life's brief span; that his work is to guide, cheer, inspire, and defend these people; and while wit and humor have their place and work in this function, they are to be used with delicacy, chasteness, discretion, and moral earnestness, and must always perform a very *subordinate* part. The Scriptures say, "Mirth is a medicine," but they do not direct us to the apothecary for our *regular diet*. In the same way wit and humor are the condiments for flavouring some portions of our moral nutriment; but if the preacher will persist in putting salt in our coffee and pepper in our bread, much more if he furnish our table chiefly with mustard and capers, it would only be poetic justice if his people grow so spicy as to perform the practical joke of sending for his resignation.

## A Pioneer Gone.

It is only the other day that we had a letter on Church matters from the venerable Dr. MacLeod, of Sydney, Cape Breton, and now the mail brings the news of his death. His race was fully run and his work