

CONCERNING POOR SERMONS.

By Knoxonian.

Henry Ward Beecher once said that he had as good a right to preach a poor sermon as any other man. No doubt he had and he sometimes exercised the right. All preachers exercise that inalienable right. The very best of preachers may go below zero sometimes in their pulpit efforts. The only preacher who is absolutely certain never to go below his own standard is the man who always preaches so poorly that he never can get any worse. He is always sure to be himself.

We once heard a youthful pastor say that his highest ambition was to make his people think that he never could preach a poor sermon. He didn't make them feel that way very long. Had he not been possessed of the maximum of conceit and the minimum of sense he never would have tried to make them feel that way at all. Any sensible, intelligent congregation knows that its pastor can and must preach poor sermons occasionally. The conditions under which sermons are prepared and delivered are so various and often so trying that so long as preachers are human their pulpit efforts must vary in merit. It is easy to say that the message is always the same. True; but the human channel through which the message comes is far from being always the same, and in spite of all we can do the message will more or less take its tone from the messenger.

Sermons come to congregations through a human organism. It was to men that our ascending Lord gave the commission "Preach the gospel to every creature." No doubt there are people in the Church now who would have improved on that standing order had they been at Mount Olivet that day, but they were not there and the Master did not enjoy the benefit of their advice. The people who can make things perfect are very seldom present when they are needed. As matters now stand preaching must be done by men, and so long as the best of men are merely human and work under varying and often trying conditions, sermons will vary in merit.

But do they vary any more than the work done by other men with voice or pen? Is there more difference between the best and poorest work of a fairly good preacher than between the best and poorest work of a lawyer, or of a political speaker, or of a writer of any kind of literature? Is there a man in the public life of Canada to-day who does not vary in his speeches from his best down to zero? Is there anything more common than to see people come home utterly disappointed from a political meeting at which some distinguished man spoke? Two factors usually cause the disappointment. They expected too much and the man was not himself. He was not up to his own mark. He was perhaps overworked and underlept. His physique was not in good form, or perhaps he was worried and out of sorts generally. Anyway he

made a poor appearance and his expectant admirers went home asking the painfully suggestive question, "Is that all?"

Those who are familiar with the courts know that the efforts of lawyers who speak often vary greatly in point of merit. Of course if a counsel speaks only once or twice in a month he has ample opportunity to keep himself up to his best, but the men who are on their feet nearly every day with little time for special preparation must go up and down the scale from the best forensic eloquence down to mere talk. One of the most bitterly disappointed men we ever met was a litigant who had just been served by one of Ontario's greatest jurists. The great jurist was not himself. As Spurgeon said after he failed partially before an Edinburgh audience, his "chariot wheels were clogged." Any man's chariot wheels may get clogged at the Bar, on the platform, in Parliament or in the pulpit. Railway trains don't always run sixty miles an hour. No clock strikes twelve every time. Perhaps Dr. John Hall was the best all-round preacher in America, and even John Hall was a long way from being up to his own mark all the time. Like lesser men he was human.

Is there any more difference between the best and poorest in sermons than between the best and poorest in any kind of literature. Shakespeare varies and even Homer nods. The greatest historians have written some sentences that are now chiefly used as illustrations of bad syntax. Writers on style set up these long turgid sentences as terrible examples of the way English ought not to be written. There is a mighty difference between the best and the poorest work of any poet. Perhaps Macaulay comes nearer uniform excellence than any other writer, but even Macaulay goes up and down the scale of excellence.

Is the Bible all the same? Is there no difference between the 17th chapter of John and the 2nd chapter of Ezra. Are the sermon on the mount and the 1st chapter of 1st Chronicles the same?

Leaving for a moment the realm of the mind and coming to the material arena, might we not well ask do men who work with their hands as well as with their brains always display uniform excellence. Is there anything more notorious than that the best mechanic sometimes does poor work? Is there anything better known than that the best business men are sometimes caught napping? Does anybody need to be told that the shrewdest politicians sometimes make the most stupid moves?

If every other kind of a man, editors, of course, always excepted, varies in his work, why in the name of fairplay should a preacher be blamed if he does not always come up to high-water mark. Perhaps under his conditions he is working far harder when he preaches poorly than when he preaches well.

After all, is any sermon poor that has gospel enough in it to save a sinner?

THE MARKS OF TRUE RELIGION.

By Rev. Henry Dickie, D.D.

"If any man among you," says James "seem to be religious." There is religion which is only a seeming. And plentiful as it may be, it is "vain"—empty, says this apostle. It has no quality. It lacks vitality and truth. The genuine article, however, does exist. And James tells us how we may know it. The marks are three in number.

First, self-control. "If any man among you," brideth not his tongue, this man's religion is vain." The tongue is the member by which we most frequently express our personality, so that if a man has a bridle upon his tongue, it is pretty good evidence that he has a bridle upon himself. Self-mastery, then, is an infallible mark of true religion. The religious man is self-masterful, self-controlled, ever subordinating the lower to the higher! And, "they that are Christ's," says Paul, "have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts."

The second mark, according to James, is "visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction," or to use a modern term, philanthropy. This stands for a man's interest in the world outside of his own little interest. It recognizes the claims upon one, of those in need. A man has something more to do than attend to saving his own soul. He has something to do in helping other people. Here we are simply upon the common platform as children of God, members of human society, each having a work to do, and each valuable in his place. This we call philanthropy, which must be a power in a Christian man's life. It is a large word, and full of meaning. It means churches, and schools, and houses of refuge, and asylums, and kindness and mercy, not, of course, to take the place of salvation by faith in Christ, but as an expression of this salvation. And is not the world becoming more and more awake to the power of this philanthropy, which is going forth into all lands?

James' third mark of true religion is, "keeping oneself unspotted from the world," that is, free from that which contaminates. This is none other than the demand that a man must be holy. But surely they were wrong, who, in some of the early centuries, thought that a man could only be holy in proportion as he cut himself off from his fellows. There never was a greater mistake than giving the name of a religious life to going out of business, banishing oneself from society and shutting oneself up in a monastery to a mere round of devotion and worship and meditation. The best and saintliest men have been busy men—men working hard with brain or hand, or both, who had little leisure, who put their religion into their business, served God in it, carried it on as unto the Lord, and amid all the pressure of business were earnest students of the Word, and found time for prayer, and maintained a close walk with God.

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Writing in the "Cosmopolitan Magazine," the Bishop of London says: "Before I went over there the folks on this side said I would be constantly asked what I thought of that magnificent country. Only one man asked me that question, and he was a very young reporter."

The Presbyterians and Methodists in Nova Scotia have decided that hereafter works not to be begun in any field by either body without a conference of the two denominations on the subject. British and foreign