

Our Contributors.

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 underslept. 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 is the best all-round preacher in America, and even John Hall is a long way from being up to his own mark all the time. Like lesser men he is 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.

FIFTY YEARS OF WITNESSING FOR CHRIST IN EUROPE.—III.

BY REV. THOMAS SIMS, D.D.

We have frequently met with the assertion that the Theology of Canada and the United States is fifty years behind the times. Germany is a full half century in advance of us. Our estimate of the scriptures, our conception of the person of Christ, our doctrine of the Atonement, and our views of Eschatology are all antiquated, and need to be radically revised.

If German Rationalism is to set the pace in Theological thinking we are lagging in the race. So much we freely admit. But Theology is easily improved into Neology, and in the light of Dr. Craig's reminiscences we may see what is the practical value of many German improvements. On page after page the Rationalistic spirit is exhibited as tending to intolerance, to social disintegration, to irreligion, and to ecclesiastical stagnation.

In the city of Hamburg between the years 1800 and 1865 population trebled but the number of churches decreased by ten, and with an Erastian and Rationalistic ministry and tendency the accommodation was quite ample for the worshippers. In the city of Berlin conditions were not greatly dissimilar. Wherever there was religious improvement in a community, any quickening of religious life and effort, it was certain to be associated with a return to a more Evangelical faith.

During the last twenty years a "Wind from the Holy Spirit" has been sweeping over Sweden and religious life there has greatly changed, but up to that time the spiritual stagnation was appalling, and may be attributed largely to German Rationalism.

When the present Crown Prince of

Sweden was ready for his course in the High School, taking which was compulsory to the heir to the throne, his mother was deeply anxious he should be under the tuition of a master who revered the scriptures. No High School in the capital had such a man at its head. The Princess and her husband found it necessary to secure the establishing of a new school, and guide the appointment of its principal, in order to place the future king under the instruction of a master who believed the Bible to be the Word of God. And closely associated with this rationalistic tendency was spiritual stagnation in Stockholm as in Hamburg and other German centres.

A theological student named Routenberg who had attended lectures in Berlin and paid more attention to his Bible than to what his professors said about it, became joyously converted. He appeared later for examination and licensure to preach in Hamburg. His examiner was an old divine, who, among other questions, asked him, "What do you think of Christ?" He replied: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity; and true man born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me when lost and lying under the curse, and has delivered me from sin—from death and from Satan's power—not with gold or silver but with His holy and precious blood and His unmerited suffering and death, that I may be His property, may live subject to Him in His kingdom and serve Him in righteousness, purity, and happiness, being made like Him, who being raised from the dead, lives and reigns for ever. And all this is most certainly true." He had only repeated the form of words every Lutheran child must repeat in preparing for confirmation, but he uttered them with such animation and evident conviction that the old examiner was startled. Looking Routenberg full in the eyes while a tear glistened in his own, he said, "Do you really believe that my son?" The candidate replied that he most certainly did. "Well," said the old man, "for many years have I examined students for admission to the office of the holy ministry, and you are the first who has told me that this doctrine of our Church was his own hope."

Rationalism, and such a hope as this, are antagonistic to each other. A joyous confidence of sin forgiven and a hope blooming with immortality are fruits of an Evangelical faith. German Theology could show no such products, as Examiner Rambach could testify out of a long experience. A scriptural experience only blossoms when there is a scriptural theology, and a scriptural theology is very apt to blossom.

As Rationalism undermines the personal hopes of the Christian, so, also, does it cut the nerve of missionary enterprise. Dr. Craig's observations illustrate this in a variety of ways. In the Presbytery of Hamburg, when pastors had learned to disbelieve "in a personal God, or in Jesus Christ as a Savior, or in the Scriptures as the word of God, or in the atonement, the resurrection, and a final judgement," it required the advent of an Evangelical pastor like Routenberg to introduce Sunday Schools into the city. In the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, with four hundred parishes and a million parishioners, the only pastors really active in seeking to bring souls to Christ were Sommer of Husum, and Broderson of Rendsburg, two men of evangelical views and evangelical experience, and the last of them was so persecuted on account of his orthodoxy that it was with great difficulty he obtained a settlement. Not until an Evangelical revival came to the Duchy of Nassau, throwing off the icy bonds of Rationalism in which she was long held, was it possible to arouse any interest in Home Missions there. Earnest Evangelical pastors in Hanover and Hesse Cassel, who had been appointed to charges where Rationalists had preceded them declared they had not a single earnest Christian in the whole of their respective

parishes, and consequently to get any Christian work done was a task beset with great difficulties and discouragements.

Since we are being assured so solemnly that our Evangelical theology is behind the times, and are being urged to cut loose from our moorings and get into the German drift, it may not be unprofitable to remind ourselves that this drift has a history. Call it by whatever name we will,—Deism, Rationalism, Liberal Christianity,—its tendency is the same always and everywhere. It devitalizes Christian experience, lowers the ideal of Christian conduct, relaxes Christian effort, and arrests Christianity's progress.

Infallibility of interpretation does not belong to the Protestant Churches and they will do a sorry day's work when they claim it, but there are facts of the Christian revelation which we can never surrender or even qualify without opening the door to confusion and irreparable loss. Prominent among these are the special divine inspiration of Holy Scripture, the Deity of Jesus Christ, redemption through his death, regeneration continued and confirmed into sanctification by the Holy Spirit, and the guarantee of a future life supplied in the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The sad results which everywhere ensue from a failure to maintain fundamental Evangelical truth should surely serve to steady any wavering mind and stimulate the churches to hold fast "the faith once delivered to the saints."

THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIOUSNESS.*

BY REV. W. G. JORDAN, B.A.

The writer of this book might lead one to expect the presentation of an elaborate theory as to the nature of "Christian consciousness" and a detailed application of that theory to the various departments of doctrine and morality; the strength of the book is however not in any completeness of philosophical or theological discussion, but rather in its suggestiveness, in the fact that it starts so many questions, and opens out so many subjects which need careful and thorough treatment. To do full justice to a subject so deep in its nature and wide in its range would require a very large volume, or even a series of volumes, and as the present book is of moderate size the author has to content himself with a brief statement of his leading thought and the application of it to a few lines of doctrinal controversy and moral development. But even this leads him incidentally to touch on questions of philosophy, theology, Biblical criticism, sociology, Church history and ethics. In this way the whole realm of modern thought and action is opened out before us, and that not simply as a present manifestation, but also as having its roots in the remote past. The question will at once arise, from what standpoint do we in the present discussion view all this changeful life, and what principle do we seek to illustrate in our selection of facts. The answer is "Christian consciousness" and "evolution." These are the two great watchwords of the book, whether they are clearly defined and brought into logical relation is somewhat doubtful. With the spirit of the book we are in full sympathy; it is throughout bright and hopeful, and contains many noble sayings. The writer has a sincere admiration for aggressive Christian work of every kind and scorns the conventionalism which so often deadens the life of congregations, or causes them to degenerate into clubs of self-complacent unsympathetic people. His denunciations of drinking and gambling are very vigorous, but he can at the same time speak kindly of manly sport and wholesome recreation. He will have the Church to be strongly on the side of temperance and purity, but he sees clearly that the rights of

* The Christian Consciousness, its Relation to Evolution in Morals and Doctrine. By J. S. Black. Boston: Lee and Shepherd.