

[Continued from last week.]

An Old Preacher on Preaching.

BY REV. ALAN MACLAREN, D. D.,
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THE PREACHER AS TEACHER.

But the preacher has to be a teacher as well as an evangelist. Whether it is a development in accordance with the principles of the New Testament church that all public, oral teaching should be in his hands is a question that does not concern us here. We may freely allow that a higher ideal would be: "When ye come together, each one hath a psalm, hath a teaching, hath a revelation," and yet see that the present order of things is best for the present spiritual state of the church, and be sure that as soon as that changes for the better, the old order will change with it. When the temperature rises, there will be an outburst of spring flowers.

But the teaching office of the preacher is depreciated, not only in the name of an appeal to the primitive condition of the church, but from the extreme other side of the most modern outlook on things, as being superseded by the hundred-voiced press. The men and women of this generation, we are told, form their opinions from books, not from sermons. I should demur to the word "form," as expressing the process by which a large proportion of them arrive at what they call their opinions; I should consent to say "get their opinions," for it is not a process of reasoned formation, but of more or less accidental and unreasoned acquisition. The opinions do not grow, are not shaped by patient labor, but are imported into the new owner's mind ready made, "in Germany," or elsewhere, but certainly not in his own workshop. But granting the influence of the press, if it supersedes the pulpit, it is the fault of the occupant thereof. A certain minister once told a shrewd old Scottish lady that he was engaged to deliver an address on the power of the pulpit, and asked what her views on the subject were. She answered: "The power of the pulpit! That depends on who's in it." Which is a truth to be laid to heart by all preachers. No man is superseded but through his own deficiencies. There must be weakness in the wall which the storm blows down. The living voice has all its old power to-day, when it is a voice, and not an echo, or a mumble. If a man has anything to say and will say it with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, he will not lack auditors. Books have their province and preachers have theirs, and neither can efface the other or supply the place of the other. The cry that the pulpit is effete comes mostly from quarters who do not despise the pulpit so much as dislike the truths which it teaches only too powerfully for their liking.

We may, then, turn to consider that aspect of the preacher's work undisturbed. And the first thing that I desire to lay stress on is, that the educational is never to be separated from the evangelistic office. True, "there are diversities of operations;" and idiosyncrasies and spiritual gifts, which for the most part follow in their line, may mark out one man more especially for the one kind of work, and another for the other. We must all rejoice that there are brethren among us who are endowed with remarkable gifts of presenting the Good News, which clearly disclose Christ's purpose for them. Still, it remains true and important to keep in view, that the truest teaching must be evangelistic, and the truest evangelizing must be educational. The web is made up of warp and woof. The evangelism which appeals to emotion only is false to the gospel; for God's way of moving men is to bring truth to their understandings, which shall then set their emotions at work, and so pass on to move the will, the directress of the man, and thus at last effect the actions. As Whittier says, "Religion begins with knowledge; it proceeds to temper, and ends in practice." The evangelist who is not a teacher will build nothing that will last. And not less one-sided, and therefore transient, will be the work of a teacher who is not an evangelist. He will give husks instead of the bread of life, notions that may rattle in skulls like seeds in dried poppyheads, but not convictions which burn all the more because they are light as well as heat.

The true theologian ever brings his doctrines to bear on the emotions, and then on the will, and then on practice. That "theology" suffers under the imputation of being abstract, dry, remote from life in the fault of the teacher, not of the subject. The preacher is not to duplicate his part, like an actor who sustains two characters in a play, and to come on the stage at one scene as evangelist, and in another as teacher. He is to be both at once and to be both always.

For the most advanced instruction that can be given or received does not leave the most initial truths behind. It only unfolds them. The teacher's subject-matter is the same of the evangelist's. The difference lies in the mode of viewing it, and the purpose for which it is considered. The last book of Euclid rests on the axioms and postulates that precede the first. No Christian thought can ever travel beyond the Incarnation, Sacrifice, and Ascension of Jesus Christ; the Indwelling Spirit, "The forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting."

To leave these behind is not progress but decadence. Not to get past, but to get more deeply into, these truths is the growth of the Christian life. Bees press themselves down into the flowers from which they would draw the honey, "and murmur by the hour" in their bells. Wasps and other voracious things sit past them and get none. "Whoever goeth onward"—as John says, with a flash of irony as he quotes the advanced thinker's watchword—"and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God." The reminder would benefit some modern successors of these proud, old incipient Gnostics. To lead minds to see the profound and far-reaching truths that underlie the gospel, what its facts presuppose of God and man, of the Father and the Eternal Word, what they reveal of the heart of things, and of the Heart at the heart of them; to lead to the recognition, and still more to the application to individual and social and national life, of the principles that flow from the facts, to disclose to the minds and to lay on the hearts of men the Incarnation and Sacrifice and Reign of Jesus as the world-redeeming power, as the revelation of the perfect life for men and nations, to find and exhibit in Jesus, the answer to all the questions of the intellect, the satisfaction of all the needs of the heart, the source and standard of ethics, the fountain of all wisdom, the renovator of humanity, the purifier of society, the King of Men—and to keep fast by the Cross and Passion of that Lord, while he is following out the issues of his work to their remotest consequences—these are the tasks of the Christian preacher in his capacity of teacher. All knowledge may come into his sphere. There is room for the widest culture. The teacher may elaborate his theme with the closest thought, or may adorn it with poetry and imagination. There is room for all gifts in the building of the great temple. Bezaleel was taught by the Spirit of God to execute his works of artistic beauty, and Hiram's workmen had to hew logs in Lebanon. But the wider the teacher sweeps his circle, the stronger must be its centre. The more he lengthens his cords, the more must he strengthen his stakes,—and the middle prop that holds up the tent, is the Cross with Christ upon it. "Him first, him last, him midst and without end." All that the teacher has to teach is summed up in one word—Christ. His whole theme is "the truth as it is in Jesus."

As the theme is Christ, so the text-book is the Bible. Whatever the higher criticism has done, it has not touched the main substance of the gospel which we have to preach, nor do even its advanced positions seem to me seriously to affect the homiletic worth of Scripture. The truths of the Bible remain, even if extreme theories as to date and manner of origination of its several parts were much more undeniably proven than they are. I venture to use the privilege of age and appeal very earnestly to my younger brethren especially, beseeching them not to be tempted by either the mistaken notion of increasing the attractiveness of their preaching, or by the natural wish of youth to do something original and break away from conventions. Conventional usages were instinct with life and meaning when they were new, and it is best to try whether their original significance is worth saving, before we resolve to shake them off. The habit of pre-facing a sermon with a text is, no doubt, a survival, and it is sometimes unmeaning enough, but it is a witness that the sermon's true purpose is to explain, confirm and enforce Scripture. Once the text was followed by a sermon dealing with it. Would that it were always so now! Better to put new life into the old form by making a text really what it is meant to be, than to break through it in a flight after something "fresh and unconventional."

It does not follow from the Bible's being the text-book that preaching is to be expository in the technical sense of that word, though I confess to a belief that if we had more of that, we should have a robust type of Christian, with a firmer grip of his professed creed, than is common today. The days of protracted exposition are, for good or evil, over. There will be no more courses of sermons like those which the painful and reverend Mr. Caryll perpetrated on Job, and published in three thick folios—double-columned, if my memory is correct.

The widest scope is to be given to varieties of mind and ways of assimilating Scripture, but that ministry only is true to its duties, and up to the height of its large possibilities, which makes its main purpose the drawing out into clear statement, and the supporting by forceful argument, and the impressing by emotional pleadings, what it has pleased God to say to men. If it was worth his while to give us the Book, it is worth our while to toll to fathom its depths, to saturate our thinking and feeling with its truths, and it is our highest function and office to interpret them to our brethren. We shall "shine as lights in the world" if we "hold forth the Word of Life." There are nebulae, as well as brilliant stars, in the firmament of the Word. It is for the preacher to show men that the stars are suns, and the nebulae galaxies of light. How unworthy it is for him to direct his telescope from the heaven of the Word to the low levels of current topics! I shall have to speak presently of the place which the latter must hold in the preacher's work, but they will hold their right place, only if he is true to his vocation as being first of all a minister of the Word of God.

More reasons than can be enumerated, much less here expanded, concur in enforcing this. In no other profession would the text-books be treated as the Bible sometimes is. There is no such discipline for the preacher as the careful, minute study of Scripture. Patient work with such unspiritual implements as lexicon and concordance yields rich fruits of spiritual discernment, gives such grasp of great principles as nothing else will give, opens out endless vistas into the deep things of God, as witness such books as the Bishop of Dunham's priceless commentaries on John and Hebrews. A preacher who has steeped himself in the Bible will have a clearness of outlook which will illuminate many dark things, and a firmness of touch which will breed confidence in him among his hearers. He will have the secret of perpetual freshness, for he cannot exhaust the Bible. No pulpit teaching will last as long as that which is given honestly and persistently to the elucidation and enforcement of Biblical truth. As the Scotch psalm-book has it:

"In old age, when others fade
He fruit still forth shall bring."

We have to do the work of Christian teachers under remarkable conditions. On the one hand there is great ignorance of Scripture and of systematised Christian truth among our congregations, and we are perpetually in danger of over-estimating the amount of knowledge on which we may reckon. Otherwise well-educated men and women have but the vaguest notions as to Scripture facts and the most confused apprehensions of Christian ideas. I for one believe that a considerable percentage in every congregation in the land is unaffected by our sermons because it does not understand what we are saying. We have to aim at simplicity, not to be afraid of being elementary, and to say as Paul said: "To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous and for you it is safe." On the other hand, we have to speak to people who have considerable education, and some who think they have more than they really have, who have been fed on a miscellaneous collection of scraps, *De omnibus rebus—et quibusdam aliis*, in magazines and handbooks, and it is hard to get an entrance for solid Christian truth into such minds. Short sermons, this Sunday's having no connection with last Sunday's, and based on snippets of Scripture, the meaning of which is of small consequence, correspond to the week's diet of desultory reading. And withal there is the heaving swell of intellectual unrest, which affects all our congregations. How are we to discharge our teaching work in the face of all this?

Mainly by the strong, sympathetic presentation of positive truth. Controversy is needful, but it is seldom efficacious. It convinces the already convinced. Better to abound in affirmations than in negations, though they will be branded as dogmatism. Speak the truth, as you know it and feel it, and let it work. There are two ways of getting rid of weeds,—to grub them up, or to sow good seed, which will spring and clear the ground. And we must never forget that, what we have to teach is no philosophy for the few, no system of doctrine for trained understandings, but the gospel for the world. When one of Luther's disciples once asked him for some guidance as to how he should preach before the Duke, the Doctor said, "All your sermons should be of the simplest. Do not regard the prince, but the simple, stupid, rude and unlearned people, who are cut out of the same cloth as the prince. If, in my sermon, I were so have Philip Melancthon and the other doctors in my eye, I should produce nothing good, but I preach the simplest way to the unlearned, and it suits everybody." Some of our hearers are educated and can follow our highest flights, but many of them cannot. But all have the one human heart, with its deepest needs identical in all. Sad souls are to be comforted, torpid ones to be stung or startled or wooed into sensitiveness and activity, eyes glued to earth to be drawn to look up, the inmost self which is ever in its depths lonely to be led to the Immortal Companion and lover of all souls, the consciousness of the bondage and burden of sin to be roused, and when roused, to be soothed—and the preacher is to do all this! Surely the vision of the needs of a gathered audience might strike the most eloquent dumb, and make the most confident timid. But "our sufficiency is of God," and God's sufficiency will be ours, in the measure in which we steadfastly follow out the purpose of making our preaching truly Biblical. If we draw from these deep fountains we shall never return with our vessels empty.

[Concluded next week.]

In June.

BY ETHEL MAY CROSSLEY.

There's a glory over the world today
Akin to the splendors of sunset glows,
And rarely lovely the orchard stands
In the palest white, and the flush of rose.

Oh, the world is sweet in the days of June,
When the heart of the year beats lithe and young,
And the birds through the happy, sunny hours,
Sing the sweetest songs that were ever sung.

The paths of the orchard are drifted thick,
And even the country roads are strewn
With apple-blossoms, pink and white,
The fragrant summer snows of June.

The music of nature wells sweet and true
In melodious measures, to welcome June,
For the world is in harmony everywhere,
And there's nothing ajar, or out of tune.

O June, fair June, with thy bloomie sprays,
In these do gladness and sunshine dwell,
O month when loveliness walks the earth,
O Nature's darling, we love thee well,
St. John.