

Our Contributors.

Christianity and Current Literature. An Address Before the Pan-Presbyterian Council in Liverpool.

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To attempt a description of the relations of Christianity and Current Literature in a twenty-minute address is as absurd as it would be to try to explain the philosophy of the absolute between two courses of a dinner. The most that I can hope to do is to suggest a few thoughts which may lead you either by way of agreement or by way of contradiction to a further consideration of the subject.

What Literature Is.

Literature is the art in which the inner life of man seeks expression and lasting influence through written words. Races and nations have existed without it; but their life has been dumb, and with their death their power has departed; they have vanished into thin air. What do we know of the thoughts and feelings of those unlettered tribes of white and black and yellow and red, flitting ghost-like pantomime across the back ground of the world's great stage? Whatever message of warning, of encouragement, of hope, of guidance, they may have for us remains undelivered. They are but phantoms, mysterious and ineffective. But with the art of Literature, life arrives at utterance and lasting power. The Scythian, the Etruscan, the Phœnician are dead. The Greek, the Hebrew, the Roman still live. We know them. They are as real and potent as the Englishman, the American, the German. They touch us and move us through a vital literature.

Religion is a life—the life of the human spirit in contact with the Divine. Therefore it needs a literature to express its meaning and perpetuate its power.

It is the fashion nowadays to speak scornfully of "a book religion." But where is the noble religion without a book? Men praise the "bookless Christ;" and the adjective serves as a left-handed criticism of his followers. True, he wrote no volume; but he absorbed one literature, the Old Testament; and he inspired another, the New Testament. How wonderful, how supreme is the Bible as an utterance of life in literature! With what convincing candor are the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows, the deep perplexities and clear visions of the heart and of man under the divine process of education disclosed in its pages! What range, what mastery of literary forms! History, biography, essays, epigrams, letters, poetry, fiction, drama—all are here. The thoughts breathe with inspiration, the unconsumed words burn with the divine presence, the figures live and move. And most of all the central figure, the Christ himself, long expected, suddenly revealed, seen but for a moment, imperishably remembered, trusted and adored, stands out forever in the simple words of a few brief chapters, the clearest, most enduring, most potent personality in the world's history.

I do not hold with the saying that "the Bible is the religion of Protestants." If that were true the Protestants would be in the position of mistaking the expression for the life, the lamp for the light, the stream for the fountain. But I hold that without the Bible Christianity would lose its vital touch with

the past, and much of its power upon the future. It would be like a plant torn from its roots and floating in the sea.

The Place of the Bible in Literature.

Christianity owes an immense part of its influence in the world to-day to the place of the Bible in current literature in a sense so large and splendid? What book is so widely known, so often quoted, so deeply revered so closely read by learned and simple, rich and poor, old and young? Wherever it comes it enriches and ennobles human life, opens common sources of consolation and cheer, helps men to understand and respect one another, gives a loftier tone to philosophy, a deeper meaning to history, and a purer light to poetry. Strange indeed is the theory of education, that would exclude this Book, which Huxley and Arnold called the most potent in the world for moral inspiration, from the modern school house. Stranger still the theory of religion which would make of this book a manual of ecclesiastical propagandism rather than the master volume of current literature.

"Beware of the man of one book," says the proverb. The saying has two meanings. The one-book man may be strong, and therefore masterful; he may also be narrow, and therefore dangerous. The Bible exercises its mightiest and most beneficent influence, not when it is substituted for all other books, but when it pervades all literature.

Christianity Expresses Itself in Literature.

Christianity needs not only a Sacred Scripture for guidance, warning, instruction, inspiration, but also a continuous literature to express its life from age to age, to embody the ever-new experiences of religion in forms of beauty and power, to illuminate and interpret the problems of existence in the life of faith, and hope and love. Close this outlet of expression, cut off this avenue of communication, and you bring Christianity into a state of stagnation and congestion. Its processes of thought become hard, formal, mechanical; its feelings morbid, spasmodic, hysterical; its temper at once over-sensitive and dictatorial, like that of a man who makes the mistake of using his house as his castle. It grows suspicious of science, contemptuous of art, and alienated from all those broader human sympathies through which alone it can reach the outer world. Insulated, opinionated, petrified by self-complacency, it sits in a closed room, putting together the pieces of its puzzle map of doctrine, and talking to itself in a theological dialect instead of speaking to the world in a universal language.

Books it may produce—books a plenty! Big fat books of dogmatic exposition; little thin books of sentimental devotion; pious puppet-show story-books in which the truth or falsehood of certain dogmas is illustrated by neatly labelled figures stuffed with sawdust and strung on wires. And these an insulated Christianity, scornful of what it calls mere literary art and unsanctified charm would persuade us to accept as a proper religious library. But John Foster spoke the truth in his essay. "On some of the Causes by which Evangelical Religion has been Rendered Unacceptable to Persons of Cultivated Taste," when he calls these books "a vast exhibition of the most subordinate materials that can be called thought in lan-

guage too grovelling to be called style." Certainly they are not literature, nor is it either to be wondered at or much regretted that they are not current. They do not propagate religion; they bury it.

Very different are the works by which the spirit of Christianity has been expressed, the vivifying influence of Christianity extended in the world of modern thought and feeling. There are sermons among them, like the discourses of South and Barrow and Liddon and Bushnell; and religious meditations like the Confessions of St. Augustine and the Imitation of Christ; the books of sacred reasoning like the letters of Pascal, and Butler's "Analogy," and Drummond's "Natural Law in the Spiritual World;" and divine poems like those of Dante and Milton and George Herbert and Cowper and Keble. But there are also books which are secular in form, neither claiming nor recognizing ecclesiastical sanction, presenting life in its broad human interest, and at the same time revealing the ethical, the spiritual, the immortal, as the chief factors in the divine drama of man.

What Christian Literature Has Done.

Christian literature includes those writings in which men have interpreted life and nature from a Christian standpoint, in language of distinction and charm, touched with the personality of the author, and rounded into form of clear and lasting beauty. The standpoint does not need to be always defined and described. A man who looks from a mountain peak tells you not of the mountain on which he stands, but of what he sees from it. It is not necessary to name God in order to revere and obey him. I find the same truth to life in "King Lear" as in the drama of Job, and the same sublime, patient faith, though the one ends happily and the other sadly. The book of Ruth is no more and no less Christian, to my mind, than Tennyson's "Dora." There is the same religion in "The Heart of Midlothian" as in the Book of Esther. The parable of the Rich Man lives again in "Romola." In "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" St. Paul's text, "The flesh lusteth against the spirit," is burned deep into the heart.

No great writer represents the whole of Christianity in its application to life. But I think that almost every great writer since the religion of Jesus touched the leading races, has helped to reveal some new aspect of its beauty, to make clear some new secret of its sweet reasonableness, or to enforce some new lessons of its power. I read in Shakespeare the majesty of the moral law, in Victor Hugo the sacredness of childhood, in Goethe the glory of renunciation, in Wordsworth the joy of humility, in Tennyson the triumph of immortal love, in Browning the courage of faith in God, in Thackeray the ugliness of hypocrisy and the beauty of forgiveness, in George Eliot the supremacy of duty, in Dickens the divinity of kindness, and in Ruskin the dignity of service. Irving teaches me the lesson of simple-hearted cheerfulness, Hawthorne shows me the hatefulness of sin and the power of penitence, Longfellow gives me the soft music of tranquil hope and earnest endeavor, Lowell makes me feel that we must give ourselves to our fellow-men if we would bless them, and Whittier sings to me of human brotherhood and divine Fatherhood. Are not these Christian lessons?

Christianity in Fiction.

I do not ask my novelist to define and discuss his doctrinal position, or to tell me what religious demonstration he belongs to. I ask him to tell me a story of life as it is,