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THE CONGREGATIONAL UNION.

ADDRESS BY THE REV. THOMAS JONES.

The Congregational Union of England and Wales had a large assembly at its annual Meeting in Finsbury Chapel on Tuesday last.

The body of the large edifice was inconspicuously filled with members of the Union, and the two spacious galleries surrounding the chapel overflowed with visitors, including many ministers and gentlemen of other sections of the Church.

The prayers of the Assembly were led by the Rev. J. R. Campbell, D. D. of Bradford. The Rev. Thomas Jones, of Swansea, the chairman for the year, delivered the opening address, and was warmly cheered.

His subject was, "The work of the Christian Preacher."

He first dwelt on preaching as the chief means of conveying to the world the conversion of men and the extension of his spiritual kingdom in the world. Preaching, he said, would ever be necessary, because there were in every thoughtful man and godly, emotions, loves, faiths, experiences, that can never be written, but must be looked, spoken, and gesticulated. The simplicity of the Church system and public worship of Nonconformists, demanded that the preaching should be full of spiritual power. They put forth no priestly pretensions, they believed in the Divine Word and the working of the Holy Spirit; and therefore preaching that Word was to them of the greatest moment. Mr. Jones then dwelt on the great subject of preaching, "the truth as it is in Jesus." The Gospel was an authoritative and pathetic call to repentance, faith, and holiness, as well as a statement of doctrines. Repent and believe the Gospel. "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Repentance was the soul weeping and reforming. Faith was the soul receiving from Christ the blessings it needed; and holiness was the transcendental state of the heart, mind, and character. Or, to put it in a simile: repentance was the seed dying and germinating in the earth; faith was the petals opening to the sun; and holiness was the beauty of the flower in its highest perfection. How were they to deal with these doctrines? In the first place the preacher must not displace the Gospel by any doctrines or theories of his own. "The truth as it is in Jesus Christ" was his subject, and he should stick to it. The love of originality was intense in some minds, and they were ever in search of new things. No wise man would assert that all the spiritual truth possible for them to know had been already discovered. The works of God were great and manifold, and after all that men had learnt of them, there were many secrets unrevealed. So the Bible was a deep and wonderful book; and although men had been searching into its truths for many ages, they had not brought to light all that it could teach. Let them have clearer intellectual insight and deeper spiritual sympathies, and they would find new revelations. Ask, seek, and knock, and voices hitherto silent should speak to them from the innermost sanctuaries of the sacred shrine. It was impossible for the preacher to be always original; he must be content to speak old truths, or not to speak at all. The greatest teachers given to the Church did not aim at constant originality. The Hebrew prophets were far more concerned to teach and enforce "the law of the Lord than to declare new truths. Our Lord Himself, the great Revealer, held up the old neglected truths before the minds of his hearers. Like some splendid temple of antiquity covered with rubbish, the truth which God had revealed was buried under the senseless traditions of men. He removed these senseless additions; made the sacred building stand out in all its ancient beauty, and said in substance, Behold the Temple of Truth where ye ought to worship. The apostles were not afraid to repeat themselves, and professed to be, not discoverers of new doctrines, but preachers of "the everlasting Gospel." They need not be wiser than Christ, or more original than the apostles. It was pleasant to many minds to leave the tame, unromantic shores of common belief, and start on a voyage of discovery over the boundless ocean of intellectual speculation. But there was danger also in that enterprise. The dreary land of universal scepticism, the chaos of faith, and the black regions of despair, were somewhere out there; and many had ventured there who never returned. He had known some who started with the canvas well in the breeze; proudly they passed over the bar, and looked back patronizingly on the shores of common belief. They sailed; the winds arose; the hurricanes blew; the thunders roared; the lightnings played; they ended in chaos and eternal night. As Luther said, "Better not flutter too high; keep themselves near Calvary and the cross." They must not in this age of rapid movement start on a voyage of discovery for any other theories or doctrines. Secondly, the Gospel must not be weakened and refined away by any modern knowledge or science, falsely so called. There was a method of preaching which might be called *obscuring the truth*. It was a most curious undertaking every way, and reminded one of a rainbow being cut into fragments, the colours divided and put into separate places, to the utter destruction of the cheering object that smiled on the black cloud like hope amid the sorrows of life. In passing through this process the Gospel was greatly changed. It melted and evaporated; the solid doctrines were transformed into attenuated, gossamer, and unsubstantial mist, thin and frail as gossamer, which was rent by a touch, and blown away by a breath. In this new state the Gospel was and was not at the same time. They tried to ap prehend it, but could not. They might as well endeavour to seize the lightning flash, grasp a rainbow, or to gather a burden of sunbeams. Not so was the Gospel in the teaching of Christ and his apostles. There was real substance in it there. It was "the bread of life" to satisfy the hunger of the mind, "a river of water of life" to quench the thirst of the soul. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth." God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,

that whosoever believed on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world." Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." "He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst." These words are strong, majestic and satisfying; and the preacher should go to the people in the fulness of the blessing of this great Gospel, for that was what they needed. Once more, the preacher should have regard to all the truths of the Gospel, to strive, to the best of his ability, "to declare the whole counsel of God." They might dwell upon "justification by faith" the great test of orthodoxy, as they were told; forgetful of the sermon on the mount, and that "faith without works is dead." It was impossible to dilate upon the poetry of the Gospel while they neglected other departments of the truth which ought to be declared. They should not give more attention to the blossoms of "the tree of life" than to the fruit which sustained the soul. The wise preacher would take the broadest possible view of the grand theme, would endeavor to see it as it was, and to assimilate it, and make it the life of his own spirit; and having done so, he would reject every theological system, every religious creed, and all the narrow-minded traditions of the pulpits and the ignorant prejudices of the churches, that required him to set aside or withhold any doctrine in the Word of God. "I have seen," continued the speaker, "in the inland counties of England flocks of sheep in the midst of a large field, fenced in by hurdles. The poor captive flock looked with longing eyes to the green pastures beyond the fence, but these were not for them. There within the narrow limits assigned, must they graze. Thus do men enclose within their creeds particular portions of the truth, and they expect you to rest and be satisfied within the narrow circle they have formed. But you are not satisfied; and now and again you have cast a longing glance upon the pasture lands beyond—you see the waving fields that stretch away to the horizon, and you would remove the old-staples, and have the liberty of these vast outlying domains of Truth. But this is not to be; and when you think or speak thus, you are if not a heretic, bordering upon it. It is delightful to escape from this narrowness into the open regions of the Bible. Entering here you may exclaim with David: "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want." Here you have perfect freedom. You may lie down in green pastures, with the flowing streams, climb the fruitful hills, inhale the fragrance of vineyards, and orchards and gardens, and satisfy your soul with the fatness of the land, which flows with milk and honey. The right methods of preaching were then discussed. The preacher's aim should be to make the people understand the Gospel, as far as that was possible; to believe that the gospel was truth; to feel that it was "the power of God;" and to embody it in a holy Christian life. And the question here was, What kind of speech is best adapted to accomplish this four-fold purpose? There should be perfect harmony between the words they used and the convictions and feelings of their hearts. Their words should correspond with the clearness of their mental insight and the intensity of their spiritual emotion. Loud sounding words which were out of all harmony with the state of the preacher's mind were of no value. Falling on the speaker's own ears, they sounded hollow, and in his deepest heart he knew they had no meaning. The hearers also, in time, would discover the truth of the matter, and see plainly enough that what he said was said because speaking was his profession. And then would follow this most natural result—the alienation of thoughtful men from the institutions of religion. Mimic thunder caused no alarm, artificial flowers had no fragrance, painted fire did not burn. It was impossible to press the great spiritual truth into men's word definitions. He could not get that who could satisfy himself on Sunday morning by the mere use of words. There was a proof that he had not gone far into the mysteries of the kingdom of God. Let him go there, and he might become a little poetic, to say the least of it. Let them use the best words within their reach. "Borrow from nature's similes, or emblems of vastness, tenderness, beauty, splendour, grandeur, duration; rob the sun of his light, the thunder of its terror, the stars of their trembling beauty; the young glow of the dawn—bring all that is grand and sublime and wonderful in nature; exhaust the English tongue, exhaust nature if you can, and you will still find that the glorious Gospel of the blessed channels of human speech are too narrow for the flood of divine truth; it overflows the banks, and carries away the works we have constructed." Let them use nature freely, for that also was a divine revelation; and this saying should cease in England. "Dull as a sermon." Their sermons should be as fresh as the breezes of heaven, welcome as the early rain, cheering as the coming of spring, fragrant as "the smell of the fields which the Lord hath blessed." The preacher should speak with becoming boldness. Let him not be alarmed by the cry against dogmatism that had grown to be so loud in these "latter times;" for rightly speaking, to dogmatize only means to assert positively—to speak with unwavering confidence. As arrogant declaimers the preacher should never be; but the timidity that hesitates the doubt that stammered in the presence of the people, and the caution that could do little more than apologise for the Gospel, should be far from him. The prophets cried "Thus saith the Lord," and the Apostles said "what have we seen and heard declare we unto you." They gazed, and saw the divine visions; they listened and heard the divine voice, or seen a vision of truth, in the Bible, in nature, or in their own consciousness, of which they could speak with unwavering confidence, and even dare to dogmatize? If not, then preaching was not their vocation; but if they had they were bound to use "great plainness" and "boldness of speech." A mingling, affected style of speaking, accompanied, as it generally is, with common place thinking, educated vanity, and dignified dullness, would neither convey the world nor edify the Church; but the clear, thoughtful, bold, ringing words of an earnest man God would bless. There were seasons, said the speaker, in the history of the Christian preacher "when all the faculties of his mind are enlarged; his spirit is bathed in a heavenly light; his heart yearns for the salvation of men; his faith is changed into vision; his love is kindled into a bright consuming flame; and his whole being seems permeated by a mysterious force which belongs not to him at other times." The promise of the Bible is fulfilled in him—he is "baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire." The hand of the Lord is upon him, and he quivers under the awful touch. At such a season as this he should not permit the conventionalisms of public worship, or any supposed dignity of the pulpit to restrain the divine affluents. God has chosen him, for the time, to be a medium between himself and his church. On one side of his nature he is in contact with heaven, on the other he touches the congregation; and he should yield himself to the power that is working in him, and allow the life-giving current to flow freely to the people. You may trust yourselves in these bright hours; for every word is living, every sentence burns, and every utterance is melodious when you are moved by the Holy Ghost. You have then reached the nethermost spring of music, therefore play on; and minds shall be enlightened, hearts shall be subdued, souls shall be saved, and evil spirits shall be chased away by the lofty strains of your inspired song. Will you let me make this remark? It is a common mistake with English preachers, in a great measure, in the depth of their heart, to keep it back. Why God put it there; He put it there that you may let it flow forth. Do not keep the Holy Spirit, do not restrain the divine affluents. If he answers your prayers, and a movement passes through your spirit like the cooling breeze on a hot day, then let it pass on. Speak as you are moved. Believe in the Holy Ghost. He is still living; He is not a mere report: He is not a mere history. Let us believe in our own prayers, and in the Spirit of God; and when He comes down upon us, let us use the liberty He intended us to use "the speaking of the thoughtful preacher would be characterized by reverence. The writers of the Bible were filled with this feeling by the contemplation of the material works of God. But their reverence should be yet more intense in thinking of and preaching the Gospel; for God in Christ was brought nearer to them and made more real to the mind than in his material works, and their preaching should express the spirit of the Gospel, as well as declare its doctrines. It was not enough to have a good sermon, well thought out, logically constructed, firm as a granite rock. They must have the genius of the Gospel, the tenderness, the love—that unnameable something which they felt the moment it was mentioned. Mr. Jones here gave out of these beautiful and characteristic illustrations which he brings from the land of his birth: "I have heard on a calm summer's evening the sweet tones of a human voice brought to my ears from the farther side of a deep valley. The day was over and gone; the night, with its gloom and sadness, had fallen upon the land; and not a sound was heard save the murmur of the river, and that solitary voice singing some native air well known there among the mountains for generations. The voice wandered over the hills, lingered in the caverns and the rocks, trembled among the tree branches, and filled the night with its soft pathetic notes. It was a sigh breaking into a song, and it created in the heart of the listener longings that cannot be well put into words—longings for the years that had been, and for friends, companions, and fathers who were gone; longings also for the perfect good, the state in which all discord has ceased, and life is restful, harmonious, and eternal. Our preaching ought to resemble that voice, and should come upon the people burdened with love, subdued with tenderness, saturated with the genius of the Gospel—the sweet lyric song, having power to call forth their aspirations, to inspire longings for the things which are not seen, to wean their hearts from the 'vain show' in which so many live, to fix their minds on Christ and God, and heaven." Speak with reality; speak with simplicity and poetry; speak with boldness notwithstanding the protest against dogmatism; speak as you are moved by the Holy Ghost; dare to speak your experience; speak also with reverence, and express the genius of the Gospel, and preaching will yet become a power in England; and God's work shall prosper among the words of encouragement to the Christian preacher. Christ had conferred upon the greatest honour by putting them in the ministry, and they should express their gratitude by their faithfulness. The purpose of their preaching ought to fill them with a holy ambition; for it was none other than the eternal salvation of their hearers. And the reward which their Saviour had promised to his faithful servants ought to kindle within them the noble enthusiasm which burned in the bosom of the apostles when they "pressed towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." The Gospel was never more needed than at the present time. Humanity stood before there a dreary, arrayed in the new garments of modern civilization; but underneath those splendid robes the ancient self was exactly the same as it was in other ages. In the essential features of his nature man remained unchanged. Men could discover no satisfactory substitute for the Gospel. Some adopted infidel theories, and tried to content themselves with the assertion that all religions were false. But mere negation could not give them rest. Physical science supplied the world with marvellous facts, but these did not meet our spiritual wants. Three things were certain: first, man must have a religion—it was the deepest want of his nature; second he could not discover a satisfying religion for himself, as was proved by the spiritual history of the race; and third, therefore, they must continue to preach to him the Gospel of the grace of God; for that was what he needed. Christ spoke of a hunger and thirst of the soul which no earthly good could satisfy, and to these He appealed in his preaching. They also might do the same; for the hunger and thirst He had promised, and their preaching should testify to the unrest that existed in the minds of the men. In the ablest writings of our times, both prose and poetry, there was an undercurrent of sadness, a sobbing of sorrow, mournful as the sighs of the captive Hebrews when they wept by the Rivers of Babylon. They had escaped from the Egypt of barbarism into the Canaan of civilization; but still the old discontent was upon them, and they sought a "better country." The place which Christ held in the minds and hearts of men was a source of inspiration and encouragement to the preacher. The name whispered by the angel was gradually filling the world; and they might say of Him as was said in the days of the flesh, "He cannot be hid." It was said of old, "In his name shall the Gentiles trust," and they knew how true this had become. Millions put their trust in him, believing he could and would give them eternal life. As they grew older, and wiser, and holier, Christ became greater, more real and divine, more to be desired, and more wonderful in their sight. All efforts to detract from Him had failed and must fail. After briefly noticing these efforts, the preacher concluded his eloquent and comprehensive address as follows: "Great name! Divine name! Dear name! Jesus Christ our Saviour! Preach it; for it is the life of the Church the light of the world, and the hope of humanity. Preach it; for it is the 'Hiding-place' prepared for us and here the soul is safe from every coming storm. Preach it; the sun in our black garments, shedding light upon our path, that we may find our way back to God our Father. Preach it, it is the tree of life planted in a desert world that we may take the fruit, and eat, and live for ever. Preach it with confidence and reverent boldness; for the ancient charm—the old attractive power—is in it still. The woman who stood behind Him in the house of Simon the Pharisee, and washed his feet with tears, did a symbolical act. From age to age, repenting souls gather around his footstool; they come to weep there, and his feet are ever wet with penitential tears. As it was in the past, and is now, it shall be in the future. His name shall endure for ever; his name shall be continued as long as the sun; and men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed. May He who is the Light, the Life, and the Love, be your guide in all your deliberations; for without Him we can do nothing." The assembly then sang the hymn, "All hail the power of Jesus' name" with so much fervor and feeling as to be well-nigh overpowering.

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