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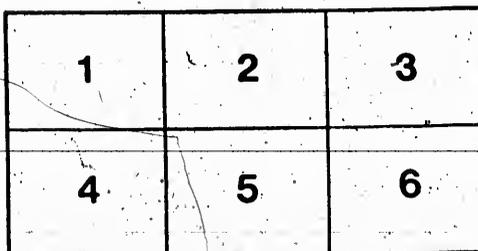
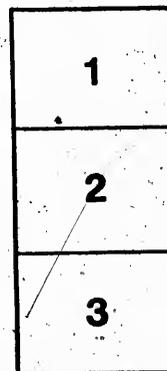
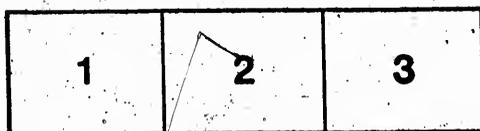
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A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

CHRIST CHURCH, FREDERICTON,

BY

GEORGE COSTER, A. M.

ARCHDEACON OF NEW BRUNSWICK.

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17.2.36

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

SAINT JOHN: ✓

PRINTED BY WILLIAM L. AVERY, PRINCE WILLIAM STREET.

1842.

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P R E F A C E .

THE unbounded freedom with which in these days every thing connected with religion is discussed, will appear, it is presumed, to all who shall honour these pages with a perusal, a sufficient reason for such a discourse having been composed and preached. Its publication has followed, in compliance with the request of many of those who heard it. This request, although at first, and for some time, he was but little inclined to submit the Sermon to public criticism, was highly gratifying to the Author—proceeding as it did from a considerable number of respectable and intelligent persons, regular attendants upon his ministry, who well know what the general tenor of his preaching during many years has been, and who must be understood by that request to have expressed their own opinion, that it has been evangelical in the proper sense of that word, and correspondent to the account here given of it. He would wish it to be received as a statement of what his doctrine will continue to be, as well as of what it has been hitherto. No new views of theology have been lately taken up by him. He adheres steadfastly to the system in which he accounts it his happiness to have been trained from his earliest years, and will certainly continue to do so until he is convinced that it is inconsistent with the Scriptures, and with the primitive and catholic belief. He thanks God that the more he reads and meditates upon the particulars which that system embraces, the more he is satisfied of their truth and soundness, and of their conformity to the principles of the British Reformation.

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A SERMON.

LUKE VIII. 18.—“Take heed, therefore, how ye hear.”

THIS admonition, our Lord himself, who spake as never man spake, thought it necessary to address to those who had the advantage of his personal ministry; and the same or similar language is of frequent occurrence in Scripture. Every advantage indeed which Divine Providence has bestowed upon us, is a trust of which we must hereafter give account, and those which tend more immediately to our improvement in piety and virtue, are a trust of the most important kind. Religious instruction, therefore, is by no means to be despised or neglected by those who would wish to render that account with joy. Those whose duty it is to administer such instruction, and those whose duty it is to receive it from their lips, are alike bound to take heed—the former what and how they teach, the latter how they hear. Through the fault of either, that religious instruction which ought to produce the greatest benefit to mankind, may, and frequently does, fail of the effect designed. Let the ministers of religion then for their part beware lest by mismanagement in their sacred office they cause the blood of others committed to their charge to be required at their hands; and on the other hand let the people also take heed. For when we find the Son of God himself, and his inspired Apostles, admonishing all so emphatically to do so, it is plain that the ruin of immortal souls is not always to be attributed to the negligence or incapacity of the appointed pastor, but that they may and do frequently miscarry through their own fault alone, and notwithstanding the possession of every advantage with respect to guidance and instruction.

When it pleased God to commission inspired persons to give religious instruction to men, the admonition, “Take heed how ye hear,” had, it must be confessed, a force and meaning which in its full extent cannot now belong to it. To the dictates of such instructors implicit and unhesitating obedience was due, as to the word of God himself proceeding from their lips. And the same may be said

of any of their recorded instructions, when once proved to be theirs. But implicit obedience can be justly claimed by inspired teachers only; and those who claim to be inspired teachers are bound to produce such proof of their real inspiration, as the inspired teachers of old did produce, before any can be obliged to admit their claim to that character. But the days of miracles are past. Christians must expect such teachers no more. Diligent and patient study must now supply, the best they can, the place of inspiration, in qualifying men for instructors in religion; and those who are the best qualified for that office, by natural gifts or spiritual acquirements, and whose commission to teach is most satisfactorily proved, have no right to expect that any thing should be received as truth in mere deference to their authority as teachers, but must be prepared always to render a reason for what they say to him that asketh them. Thus much however is indisputably due to the words of every one who has a right to be heard at all upon such a subject—that he be heard with attention and with candour. To this, my brethren, all who ever address you from this pulpit have a claim which none, I should think, will venture to deny in words, although perhaps it is more, than is in fact always conceded to them. Our commission, I presume, you acknowledge. We claim, then,

I. TO BE HEARD WITH ATTENTION.

But it will hardly be contended that all in our various congregations are attentive hearers of what is delivered to them. Possibly none are at all times so attentive as they ought to be, considering the momentous interest of the subjects treated of. The motive which brings every man to Church is of course best known to himself. But there are other motives which may produce this effect, besides a sincere regard for the doctrine of salvation, and a true concern about his soul. In some, if we may judge by the general tenor of their actions and discourse elsewhere, the right motive does not act at all; in others, we have cause to fear that it acts in too slight a degree, so as to be easily overpowered by opposite suggestions of various kinds; too slight to enable them to dismiss, even for the time, from their thoughts, the cares or the pleasures of the world, the vanities of time and sense. To have their thoughts always under controul belongs not indeed even to the best disposed and the most considerate. Our imaginations, however carefully checked, are but too apt, on all occasions, to be busy with objects foreign to the business in which we are engaged; and never more so than in the midst of religious exercises. Some

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degree of this is merely the weakness of our fallen nature, and does not by any means imply a habit of indifference about the most interesting of all concerns. It is a fault, however, which we ought not to pardon to ourselves, but labour most carefully to correct. The voluntary indulgence of it is a crime not only against God but also against our own souls, the consequences of which are very dreadful. Like other evil habits when it once becomes settled, it is most difficult of cure; so that it greatly behoves us to take heed that it do not grow upon us. There is nothing in fact against which we have more reason not only to watch but to pray, than a habit of inattention on a subject so unspeakably important, however it may be brought before us. Whenever we come hither, it should be with the most deliberate purpose of gaining all the instruction which can be gained from what is said; and after we have departed hence, it would be well if we made it a rule to ourselves to give some time to serious consideration, whether something may not have been said which is worthy of a continual remembrance, and to which, for the sake of our own souls, a careful and steady observance is due, as an useful incitement of devotion, or a rule of life and manners. We claim

II. TO BE HEARD WITH CANDOUR.

The ministers of religion have often to complain of unreasonable prepossessions and prejudices of various kinds existing among those to whom they are commissioned. Some are prepossessed against christianity in general, or against particular parts of it. Others there are who profess the greatest respect for religion itself, but to whom the priesthood is an utter abomination. They cannot express their horror of all religious establishments, nor tolerate those who belong to them. Such as these however are seldom, I presume, to be found among our hearers. But there is another prepossession with which all of us have to contend more or less, and which is either of a personal nature against the preacher himself, or applies to the matter of his preaching. But no prepossession of this nature—I think I may add—not even a well grounded objection to the character of an authorized teacher, which is the strongest and most trying case of all, should prevent you from giving him a candid and attentive hearing, not for the preacher's sake, but for your own. You should consider, not who it is that speaks, nor how he expresses himself, but *what* he utters. And so far as the doctrine is discerned by your reason, or felt by your conscience to be

true, or appears to stand upon the testimony of God, so far you should receive and observe it.

It often happens, no doubt, that our words are without effect upon a portion of our hearers, because the matter of our discourses is not exactly such as they have previously made up their minds that it ought to be, and they will listen patiently to nothing that opposes this prepossession. Some are not satisfied except we dwell continually and almost exclusively upon a few points relating to the Saviour and his mediation; others are for practical discourses only—the latter forgetting that faith is the foundation of all christian morality, the former overlooking the following strong injunction of the Apostle, “I will that thou affirm constantly that they which have believed in God, might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.” Were we to adapt our teaching to the taste of either of these sorts of hearers, we should not preach the gospel faithfully. We are bound unquestionably to press upon our people all the duties of the christian life, and to ground them on the motives which the gospel sets before us.

It is an unhappy consequence of the divisions prevalent among christians that a preacher can hardly expect to be heard with candour by persons of a different persuasion from his own; it were well if he could always depend upon such a hearing from members of his own church and congregation. For even within the church there is unfortunately a diversity of opinion as to what constitutes a full and faithful preaching of the gospel; and the preacher who has the misfortune to be represented, by persons who are thought to be good judges of such matters, as not delivering it fully and faithfully, cannot but find in this censure, whether he deserve it or not, a serious obstacle to success in his ministry; and as every preacher is plainly liable to this accusation from some quarter or other, a few calm words on the subject may not be out of place.

If it be meant by such censure that the preacher does not take precisely the same view of certain points as may be taken by those who utter it, but differs from them with regard to some matters which they have been taught to regard as of vital importance—and if such difference really exist—it is certainly much to be regretted. But it is not therefore certain that they are right, and that he is wrong, and the relative situation of the parties gives him a right to a patient and candid hearing, supposing him to be duly commissioned. Our duty—and it is one which I hope we earnestly endeavour to perform—is to inform ourselves the best we can on the subjects we have to treat, and

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then deliver faithfully what we have learned. We do not pretend to inspiration—we know no way of forming correct notions of religion, except a diligent study of God's Holy Word, and of those helps to the right understanding of it with which we have been supplied by the learning and piety of ancient and modern Divines—together with prayer for heavenly guidance and direction; and while we are conscious to ourselves that we do not neglect those means of right information, we may trust that we shall be preserved from leading any one astray. Some may preach with greater power and effect than others—for there is a difference in men's capacities and gifts;—but none who take the course I have described can, I should think, so far fail of what they aim at, that it may be truly asserted of them that they do not preach the gospel. Some may teach, as essential parts of the gospel, doctrines which others do not consider as belonging to it; but none, I hope, will fail to deliver any of those truths, the belief of which was deemed necessary to salvation in the primitive times, although through human infirmity, some may do so with a mixture of other doctrines of a questionable nature which they erroneously believe to be contained in Scripture; and those who have thus added to the faith once delivered to the saints are necessarily apt to consider others, who hold themselves bound to adhere strictly to it, as not preaching the gospel fully, in proportion to the importance they attach to their own additions to it. But if the doctrines which any of us omit to teach be only such as rest upon no certain ground of holy scripture, and cannot be proved to have formed part of the catholic and primitive faith, the omission of them can at all events do no harm, neither can it afford sufficient ground for charging the preacher with unfaithfulness in the delivery of the gospel.

Deficiency and imperfection must be expected in the doctrine of every uninspired teacher, and those who are the best qualified for their office will be the last to boast, or even to think highly, of their own performance. We are all open to censure; and in the present state of society, it would be folly to hope that we can escape it, be our performance what it may. I am not sure that we ought even to desire to escape it; for if we receive it properly, it is better for us than praise. Its effect, even when uncharitably administered, ought to be that of exciting us to more earnest endeavours to be found faithful stewards of the mysteries of God, and safe guides for the people to follow. It is only when we have reason to fear that the interests of truth and godliness may suffer from our silence under reproach, whether it be just or unjust, that we should be prompt and eager to

defend ourselves. But as we are commissioned expressly to preach the gospel, as we have sworn to do so, and as all our hope of saving ourselves or others must perish if we do not, God forbid that any of us should be either negligent in any degree of this sacred duty, or unconcerned about the opinion which others may entertain respecting our faithfulness in the discharge of it.

Of the doctrine delivered from this pulpit to yourselves, my brethren, it is fit that I should speak with deep humility. But of this I am sure, that if what you hear be not the gospel, it is not for want of a sincere and earnest endeavour on our part to speak as the oracles of God. We preach, as all will bear us witness, the glad tidings of the remission of sins, through the blood of the great atonement, and hold out as the condition of God's pardon, repentance from dead works, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We teach that by grace you are saved through faith—but *that* a faith of which obedience is the indispensable fruit, since without holiness no man shall see God. We affirm constantly (as we are in scripture expressly enjoined to do) that the grace of God which bringeth salvation hath appeared to men, not to release those who have believed in God from the obligation to maintain good works, but to make them more alive to that obligation, and zealous to acquit themselves of it. With all the power of holy coven^tent we can command, we urge you—whatsoever things are honest, pure, lovely, and of good report, to think on those things, and do them. We ascribe no virtue whatever to the faith which does not exercise this salutary influence upon the life, but at the same time strenuously deny that any man is accounted righteous before God for any thing that he himself can do. We insist, that although we should have done all that is commanded us to the best of our ability, we should still be but unprofitable servants, whose reliance for salvation must be after all solely upon the mercy of our heavenly father, which is extended to the penitent believer for the sake of His blessed Son. This, we hope, is not to preach a dry and profitless morality. The morality we teach is that which we have learned from the precepts of Christ and his Apostles, and we ground it upon the motives which they present to us.

We hold that the great end of every dispensation of true religion, and more especially of the gospel, is the moral purification of the believer; that the Son of God was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil; that the salvation which he wrought means a deliverance from the power of sin, no less than from its punishments; that so long as our servitude to sin remains unbroken we

must continue liable to that punishment ; and that this servitude cannot be broken but by the concurrence of divine grace with our own earnest endeavours. We apprehend that even the cross of Christ will not profit those who disregard his precepts in the conduct of their lives—that He is our law-giver to whom we owe faithful obedience and submission, as well as our Redeemer, mighty to save. And accordingly we hold out no hope of pardon to the sinner, except upon a true and effectual repentance—that is forsaking of sin, followed up by a resolute endeavour to do the will of God in all things.

There are doctrines indeed which some consider as essential parts of the gospel, which we cannot teach, because we find them not in the sacred scriptures. We encourage no man to believe himself the object of an *unconditional* election to eternal life and happiness, but would have every one consider himself as in a state of trial from the dawn of reason to the close of life—which supposes of course that he may at any time fall from rectitude, and forfeit the prize of his high calling, except he recover himself by repentance. We hold however, that every man to whom the gospel is preached has been elected to all the necessary means of grace and salvation, and to salvation itself, provided that he diligently use those means, but not otherwise. We doubt extremely that *assurance of salvation* which many profess to entertain, as relying upon no sure warrant of Holy Scripture, inconsistent (as it appears to us) with the notion of a state of trial, and leading to evil consequences. We rather press upon our readers the advice of the Apostle—“Be not high minded, but fear. Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Convinced that of ourselves alone we can do nothing, and that we continually need the help and support of the Holy Spirit—we nevertheless look for no such sensible operation of that Spirit upon our minds as we often hear of, but expect to trace his heavenly influences only in their effects. We remember the words of our blessed Lord. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

Thus do we understand and preach the gospel ; and we have the satisfaction of knowing that what we teach has the sanction of all antiquity as well as of the Scriptures ; while for that which we reject the same sanction cannot, we believe, be produced. And see you not, my brethren, in the doctrine I have imperfectly described, a manifest tendency to good ? From those principles, how can any man derive comfort rationally, while he continues in a course of sin or carelessness ?

They are equally opposed to fanatical fervour on the one hand and to lukewarmness on the other. They authorize the sincere believer to trust with unshaken confidence in the mercy and goodness of His Heavenly Father, while striving to walk in the path of his commandments; but at the same time powerfully rebuke the presumption of those who count upon His blessing while negligent of its conditions. Whoever really embraces them will be seen not only watching carefully against sin, but also active and zealous in well doing, that he may make his calling and election sure; and valuing the testimony of a good conscience above every earthly blessing. He will never rest satisfied with such a degree of virtue as may merely carry him decently and respectably through this present world, but will labour earnestly to approve himself to God who seeth the heart as well as the outward conduct—nor will he ever be content with any degree of proficiency to which he may already have attained, but strive continually to grow in grace, and be making steady progressive improvement.

If this doctrine differ in any respect from what is taught elsewhere, and what some among ourselves consider as the true doctrine of the scriptures, we cannot help it. We are bound to deliver what we ourselves believe to be the truth, let others teach as they may. By whatever instruction men are led to love and fear God, and to abhor and forsake unrighteousness, we are bound to rejoice at the effect. But the principles of which we are conscientiously persuaded, none will expect us to contradict or to betray. We shall of course assert and maintain them firmly, but with temper and charity towards those who differ from us—however willing we may be, within proper bounds, to become all things to all men, that we may by all means save some: nor shall we give offence by so doing to pious and reasonable persons, whatever their opinions may be.

And what is it we expect from those who hear us? Nothing but what I am sure is just and reasonable—only an attentive and candid hearing. We would as freely caution you against too much deference for the authority of your teachers, as against too little respect for them and their ministry. With respect to the doctrine of any of us, I would exhort you to prove all things, and then hold fast what is good. Examine our doctrine as closely as you will by the light of scripture and primitive antiquity, and if it prove not to be the faith once delivered to the saints, and constantly held in the best and purest times, I admit that we have no right to complain if you reject it. We have no authority to dictate to you in matters of faith. The legitimate influence of every particular teacher depends upon his speaking as the oracles

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of God; and you are not bound by any man's private interpretation of those oracles. Even when we exhort you to pay respect and deference to the fathers of the christian church, it is not as if they were "commissioned expounders," but simply as being "faithful witnesses" of the truth once delivered; and we would have you follow them only, so far as they agree together. It is not however too much to demand for any one who is duly authorised to teach, that he be heard with attention and with candour—for His sake, in whose name he comes to you, for the sake of the all-important subject which he treats of—for the sake of your souls. And so far, my brethren, be your opinion of the preacher what it may—we beseech you—

Take heed how ye hear.

THE following extracts from a Sermon, preached at the last Episcopal visitation, are added, for further explanation of the Author's sentiments on the subject treated of in the latter part of the foregoing discourse.

THE minister of religion must not be surprised at hearing himself accused by persons, holding strong opinions on particular points, of not declaring fully and correctly the counsel of God; not only if he do not constantly give to those points a prominent place in his teaching, but also if he do not take precisely the same view of them as they do. He may preach, for instance, the corruption of human nature; but unless he will allow it to be *totally* corrupt, he will be deemed by some not to declare the truth fully—although, if they were pressed strongly on this subject, they would probably confess that they do not themselves mean quite so much as their words signify. He may aver, in the strongest terms, that we must all stand indebted for salvation to the merits and mediation of Christ alone; but unless he will agree that this is to be brought about by our having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, some will hear him with disapprobation. He may maintain, as strongly as he will, the necessity of spiritual influence, and of the continual aid and support of divine grace; but

if he should, at the same time, insist that men must co-operate with this spiritual agency, he must expect that some will deny that he sufficiently magnifies Christ. However highly he may extol the mercies of redemption, yet, if he venture to speak of any condition being annexed to the promised blessings of the Redeemer, or doubt that the favor of God towards individuals is indefectible, he must not expect that all will acknowledge him to be a faithful preacher of the Gospel.

Unquestionably it is a preacher's duty to be very cautious, not only that he preach nothing contrary to the truth of God, but also that he preach the whole truth, so far as he is able to ascertain it. Wilfully to fall short of this, for fear of giving offence, or with a view to gain or popularity, would be most grievous delinquency. To preach otherwise than as he believes, on any point, for the sake of meeting the peculiar views of any portion of his congregation, however pious or respectable the members of it may be, or even for the purpose of gaining converts to godliness, would be almost equally inexcusable. Our people, indeed, have a right to expect that we preach according to the Scriptures, and also according to the tenets of the Church whose orders we have received. By these standards they have a right to judge our doctrines; but we may very properly protest against being judged by that of any one's private opinion. In other pulpits, other and stronger doctrine may be preached, and the hearers of that doctrine may be pleased and seem to be edified thereby, while what we ourselves consider as the truth may appear to us to be heard with indifference by too many, and to produce too little of the effect that we would desire. Still it is our duty to persevere in delivering what we ourselves believe, seeking by fervent prayer the divine blessing upon our ministrations. Our course must always be decided by our own honest convictions, and not by the judgment of others. Popularity is no test of truth—neither can we safely judge of doctrines even by the moral impressions attributed to the preaching of them. No doubt, as I have somewhere read, some truth must be possessed by those who are enabled to convert sinners from the error of their ways; but that error may and does often mingle with that truth is very certain, because on many points such persons are seen to differ from each other, and whereinsoever they differ they cannot all be right.

Before any preacher is censured for not adopting doctrine which may appear to be successfully preached elsewhere, it should be inquired whether he is at liberty to do so. For the Law, alike of the

Church and of the Realm, binds the Clergyman of the Church of England to take heed that he teach nothing in his preaching but that which is agreeable to the doctrines of the Old Testament and the New, and that which the Catholic Fathers and ancient Bishops have gathered out of that doctrine. Thus is he obliged to reject all novelties, to be sparing of private interpretations, and to continue to walk in the old paths, although the consequence of his doing so be, that he is accused by some of not declaring the whole counsel of God.

Nor ought this to be accounted a hardship either by the preacher or his hearers. For is it not manifestly absurd to suppose that any truth at all necessary to salvation should be left to be discovered at this late period, or that the same doctrine which in the primitive times made such multitudes of converts to godliness, and rendered them willing to sacrifice life itself for Christ's sake and his Gospel's, would not serve all the needs of the present generation, were it received and obeyed by us as it ought to be? And have we not seen enough of the bad effects of rash speculation in religious matters, in the disturbance of the Church's peace and unity, to make us very reasonably afraid even of small innovations? Even the established phraseology is worth preserving, for the sake of the less educated portion of our people, who cannot fail to be confused by hearing the same terms used in different senses by different preachers. So great in fact is the confusion which has arisen from this cause, that not only are those who think it behoves them to preach the doctrines of the Church in the language of her formularies liable to be considered and represented as not preaching the gospel, but also some of the formularies themselves have fallen into disrepute with persons who have learned from our dissenting brethren to understand some important terms in a sense different from that in which they were evidently used by the compilers of these formularies. Most especially is this the case with regard to the Baptismal Service, the language of which it requires more ingenuity than people generally possess to reconcile at all satisfactorily with the now popular doctrine of regeneration.

The proper remedy for this evil appears to be, a strict adherence, on the part of the preacher, to the language of the venerable formularies of our Church; and a more accurate and attentive study of them, on the part of our people. And who can doubt that this is a safe course for both to pursue? The eminently learned Reformers of our Church may be (nay, surely they are,) believed by all of us to have thoroughly understood the doctrine of the Scriptures, and the records of primitive

antiquity, by which they were guided in the interpretation of them; and none knew better than they how to express and convey to others the knowledge which from those sources they had obtained. There is no fear, therefore, of our being led away from the faith once delivered to the saints, by a steadfast adherence to them; and vainly, I think, would any one attempt to improve the system with which they have provided us, by engrafting upon it any modern or ancient inventions—which, however set off by the talents and zeal of their advocates, and however recommended by their supposed beneficial effects among Christians of other denominations, are quite out of place in that system—like pieces of new cloth upon an old garment—which they neither strengthen nor embellish.

