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REV. A. T. PIERSON, D.D.

(From Photograph by Mr. J. E. Watson, Detroit, U.S.A.)

REV. A. T. PIERSON, D.D.

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA.



HERE seems to be some subtle quality in the rare American atmosphere, that we do not find in these eastern climes, which gives to our cousins across the Atlantic the alertness, push, and vivacity which so generally characterize them. In these respects Dr.

ARTHUR T. PIERSON, whose portrait we here give, is typical of his race. Slender in figure, he shows as much vitality and *vim* as would suffice for any three ordinary sons of steady-going "John Bull." What position this "go-aheadism" might have gained for him in the departments either of commerce or of politics we cannot attempt to guess: what it has done for him in the good providence of God, is—to give him a leading place among the evangelical pulpit luminaries of to-day, in a land where almost every man considers himself fit to rule the Senate or to fill the Presidential Chair.

Whether or not Dr. Pierson is a born preacher, he was certainly born to preach. He has been doing little or nothing else since he was twenty years of age: he is now over fifty. A native of New York city, he gained his first experiences of Christian work in destitute parts of that capital. There he learned the secret of self-possession in extempore speech—a secret which many a member of our British House of Commons, and many a paper-bound preacher, would give something to acquire to the same degree. Of his early religious impressions we know nothing; but it is on record that he was admitted to the fellowship of the Presbyterian Church at the age of fifteen.

After passing through college and theological seminary, he was "licensed" to preach, by the New York Presbytery, at twenty-three, and some months afterwards was installed as pastor of a church in Binghampton, New York. This, curiously enough, was a Congregational Church; but the custom of pastoral interchange between one denomination and another appears to be a

thing as common in America as it is rare in Great Britain. Three years later he returned to the Presbyterian fold, and successively filled pastorates at Waterford, New York; Detroit, Michigan; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Philadelphia—where he has since ministered to the well-known "Bethany Presbyterian Church."

The most striking event in Dr. Pierson's ministerial career was that which happened during his pastorate in Detroit. There he met with a crisis, both in his inner and outer life, which has left its impress deeply engraven on heart and method. The story of this change will be best told in his own words, as contained in a personal narrative which was published some time ago:—

In January, 1876, I found myself pastor, already for seven years, of a large, wealthy church (in Detroit), with one of the finest and most elegant church buildings in the whole land; with everything to gratify carnal ambition, worldly ease, and desire for human applause. I had been led by a most singular searching of heart to see that I had been more or less making an idol of literary culture, intellectual accomplishment, and worldly position; and a few months before, I had solemnly renounced all these things, that I might be a holier and more useful man. I saw that I was not largely blessed as a winner of souls.

For the first time in my life I had no conscious idol in my heart; but for the first time I had also a blessed consciousness of real communion with God in prayer. I was especially led to ask, with peculiar importunity, that I might in some way be enabled to reach the multitudes of unsaved souls who were around us, but outside of the churches. The clear and positive conviction absolutely possessed me that this prayer had been inspired of God, and would be answered in a marked way that would show the hand of God. This solemn persuasion was communicated to my wife, but to her alone; and we joyfully and trustingly waited for God's full time to come for Him to fulfil this desire and prayer.

On March 19, 1876, the Lord's Day, unusual power was given me in preaching; and in the evening I felt so strongly that the time was very near when God would reveal His right hand, to give me new access to unsaved souls, and particularly the *non-churchgoing* masses, that I felt constrained to communicate my feelings to a brother clergyman; who, at my request, remained after the service to talk with me. The next Friday evening, March 24, at the church prayer-meeting,

as a pastor, I frankly opened my heart to my beloved people. I spoke to them as to the obvious lack of power in the church to reach these neglecters of worship; and I remarked that our costly, elegant, and superb church edifice perhaps tended to repel the poor, and make them feel not at home.

For many months the hearts of pastor and people had been getting wedded and welded in closer sympathy, and that night there was a certain indescribable melting of souls into unity, as though the Spirit were fusing us all together. I drew involuntarily near to the praying assembly, and descending from the pulpit into the very midst of the people, opening the Bible, I read the prominent promises to praying souls, one after another, in such a way as to lead our hearts up, from the broadest and most general, to the highest and most specific.

The effect of this grand climax of Scripture testimony was—to drive out unbelief, and fit us all to pray in faith. I knelt among them; and we, together, earnestly besought God to remove even a mountain obstacle that might hinder us as a church from effectually reaching the unsaved. We felt the Spirit almost as vivid as a visible presence, interceding within us, "with groanings which cannot be uttered," for a true revival of God's work—a new Pentecost of Power—that would draw the masses to us, or inspire us to go to them and win them. No one who was present will ever forget the solemnity of those moments, when a whole people wrestled with God for a blessing. *While we were praying, that church building was already burning.* When the prayer ceased, we found the room partly filled with smoke, but attributed it to the contrary wind which was driving down the flues. In fact, the fire had ignited the laths near the smoke-pipe, and was slowly working its way behind the plaster, and so escaped detection, though several of us made a thorough search, after the assembly was dismissed.

Early the next morning the flames burst forth after their long confinement through the night, and laid the beautiful building in ruins. I felt, in common with many devout souls, that this was God's way of opening the door, great and effectual, to the neglecting and neglected masses about us; and that this was the grand significance of this whole event. We at once secured the Grand Opera House, where, for sixteen months, I preached the Gospel, extemporaneously, confining my themes to the great central truths of salvation; and with a marked blessing on my work. More souls were hopefully converted in one year than in the whole of my previous ministry; and, what was the most remarkable fact of all, the converts were almost exclusively from those "outsiders," whom the church had hitherto failed to reach, but toward whom our hearts had been specially drawn. From the day of that fire the Fort Street Church, of Detroit, was, and still continues to be, largely attended by the class of people whom we had found it so difficult to reach or attract before. The extemporaneous preaching of a simple and free Gospel for sixteen months, in a place of popular amusement, somehow drew us to these neglected masses, and drew them to us; and the effect has been to change the relation of that church to the whole community, and greatly increase its power for good.

In the study in the tower of the church-building was a large mass of manuscript matter not hitherto used, but of great value to me in preaching, containing Scripture studies,

plans of sermons, &c. The tower of the church acted like a chimney, and there the flames raged hottest. The study table was so burned, that nothing that could be consumed escaped, *except that manuscript matter*, which was found essentially unharmed in the ruins. No philosophy of mine can account for its rescue; but it impressed every one as a mark of the hand of God! Mr. George Müller* was so impressed with these events, as showing the unquestionable interposition of God that, at his request, I sent forth a tract, called "The Pillar of Fire," in which a simple narrative of the Lord's dealings with me and my people was given.

It ought to be added, that that noble Fort Street Church, of Detroit, though they did not see their way clear to adopt their pastor's plan and build a large plain tabernacle and make it absolutely a free church, did, by a vote that lacked but two of unanimity, make the *evening service* as free as at the Opera House; and the pew-holders renounced voluntarily all right in their pews at that second service. But, best of all, the *atmosphere* of the church was changed: instead of the former comparatively cold and indifferent attitude of the people to the "masses," every effort was adopted to make them *feel* that they were wanted. We had plain congregational singing; young men went by the score every Sunday afternoon to distribute attractive invitations to the church services, at hotels, saloons, street corners, &c.; familiar "after-meetings" were held at the conclusion of the Sunday evening services; missionary operations were carried on to establish new Sunday-schools and churches in destitute districts. The influence of that close contact between God's people and the practically heathen multitudes in that city, has been—and still is—a blessing to *all the churches there*. It proved that a rich, cultured, aristocratic congregation can reach the masses with the Gospel.

Those who have read the accounts of the Northfield Convention may have observed that Dr. Pierson is one of the choice spirits whom Mr. Moody gathers around him in his Conferences. Among the men, deeply taught of God, who gather there, none excel the Doctor in lucidity of exposition, or in extensive acquaintance, both with the letter and the soul of Scripture. Indeed, the marked peculiarity of his present teaching and preaching is its Biblical character. His studies, we believe, are almost confined to the Word of God in the original tongues. His method is systematic to a degree. His motto is, "Search, meditate, compare." In his favourite copy of the Bible he has written at the beginning of each book a synopsis of its contents, besides much marginal matter, which makes the volume thoroughly self-contained, and one from which, at any moment he can pour out a flood of pungent, practical talk, drawn from the hoarded stores of memory, and suggested by his own annotations. During the "Summer School for Bible Study" among students at Mount Hermon, in 1886, it

* A sketch of whom will be found on Pages 266-269.

was something to see the way in which the worthy Doctor kept the young men's pencils going. In half an hour he gave them matter enough for two months' rumination. He addresses Sunday-school teachers in Philadelphia, at the Y. M. C. A. Hall, on Saturday afternoons, without denominational distinction, and has an audience of from eight to twelve hundred.

Bible study is not Dr. Pierson's sole "hobby"—a hobby, by the way, which it is impossible to ride to death. He is equally intense on the subject of Foreign Missions. In speech he is clear, precise, and intellectual, rather than pathetic; but few men, we venture to say, can give a more rousing and stimulating presentment of the claims of the wide, wide world, on the Church of Christ. In this matter of taking the Gospel to the unevangelized heathen, he is entirely a man after Mr. Hudson Taylor's* heart. He believes the thing can be done in a very few years if the Church will but yield to the promptings of the Holy Ghost, and put a united shoulder to the wheel. To the cold and calculating eye of prudence some of his ideas may seem Utopian; as, for instance, his proposal, broached at one of the Northfield Conventions, that there should be a World Conference of all the evangelical churches, in order that they might at once apportion out between their forces every unevangelized spot on the known surface of the globe. No doubt this *could* be done; few of us, however, have the faith to believe that it *will*—just yet.

Dr. Pierson has published two books, one on each of his favourite subjects. "Many Infallible Proofs"† is "A series of practical chapters on the Evidences of Christianity: or, the Written and Living Word of God." An enthusiastic reviewer thus describes it:

It sweeps along, with his matchless method of accumulative reasoning, like a resistless tornado, gathering volume and force as it goes, till seemingly no sceptical theories can stand before his arguments.

His other book, "The Crisis of Missions" has been referred to by another reviewer thus:

Surely if the inspiration and the force of this book were imbibed and felt by the whole sacramental host, there would be a mighty uprising, a grand anointing, and a holy crusade, to storm the kingdom of darkness all along the line.

These utterances will serve to show that Dr. Pierson's fervour of thought and feeling is not dissipated by being filtered through his pen. That pen, we may add, is kept nearly as busy as his tongue. He writes much; and his contributions are distributed over some thirty different religious magazines and papers. And this in addition to his preaching and pastoral work in connection with Bethany Church, which itself constitutes a vast field of effort, chiefly among the working-class. The buildings, embracing the Church and Sunday-school Hall (each capable of holding 2,500 to 3,000 persons), cover half a block, and represent a money value of 250,000 dollars. The fame of Bethany Sunday-school, for size and perfection of arrangement, has gone throughout the world. In this building a lay college is held from September to May; and something is going on almost every evening. There is an assistant pastor, and a large corps of earnest workers. Bethany Church is practically under the free-pew system. Gospel services are kept up most of the year in a mission tent, and conversions are constantly taking place.

Dr. Pierson believes that modern preaching, as a rule, aims at literary excellence rather than saving power. It lacks Biblical matter and spirit, and fails to drive the arrows of conviction home upon the individual conscience. Churches are too costly and exclusive; and the Gospel is not carried to the poor. Dr. Pierson is himself a proof that there need be no mutual repulsion between culture and Holy Ghost power. His knowledge seems to be encyclopædic; but instead of smothering, it only serves to feed, the flame of his untiring zeal.

Feeling the need of arousing the churches to larger missionary enthusiasm, Dr. Pierson, on June 5, 1889, placed his resignation in the hands of the sessions. He proposes to go wherever the Lord leads him to address Christians on the needs of the Mission Field; and he will probably visit mission centres in various parts of the world. Many who remember Dr. Pierson's stirring utterances at the Pan-Presbyterian Council in 1888, and during the subsequent Mission tour through Scotland,* in company with Dr. A. J. Gordon, will understand his peculiar fitness for the proposed extended field of labour.

* See pages 366-369.

† Published by Morgan & Scott.

* See page 109.