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Marcus Dods The Preacher.

REV. ROBERT CHRISTIE, D.D., LL.D.

A just estimate of Principal Marcus Dods as a preacher may be gained from a volume of sermons, which have been selected from manuscripts left at his death.* The aim in the sermons chosen was to represent Dr. Dods' preaching as a whole. Hence, "While the majority of the sermons are recent, the volume includes several which date in their first conception from the years when he was at the height of his influence in Glasgow". To know this is important, since we learn thereby what kind of preaching held popular attention during a generation of great theological change and unrest. The preacher was known to be one of the most open minded scholars of his day, keeping himself informed on all the advances in natural science and Biblical learning, and, if these discourses be a fair sample of his pulpit themes through all those years, it will be seen how he kept out of his preaching all allusions to the questions of criticism and science so hotly debated at

*Christ and Man. Sermons by the late Marcus Dods, D. D., Principal of New College, Edinburgh. New York: George H. Doran Company. \$1.50.

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the time. Whatever perplexities he had in adjusting the new learning to the old positions were never thrust upon the attention of his congregation. He dealt with subjects in a way to beget or strengthen faith in the cardinal doctrines of Christianity.

Ripe scholarship, a fine insight into human nature, and strong conviction are stamped on the face of every discourse in the volume. He assumes that under all the changes that have taken place in the last eighteen hundred years human needs remain unaltered, and hence found New Testament teaching applicable to the troubles of the individual and to present day society. We have a sample of this in his treatment of "The Baptist's Message to Jesus", where he says, "John's doubt moves over each generation and has to be solved by every man. 'Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?' Do we find in his person God, righteousness, and eternity? And this doubt is nourished and strengthened much as John's was. Men are always tempted to resent Christ's method. His work seems so slow: one is tempted to say, so inefficient, so unmarked by urgency, in so many ways it disappoints the expectations of practical men. . . . It is precisely John's difficulty which is today preventing many earnest men of the working classes from believing in Christ. His methods bring no immediate relief, no revolution, no upturning of the social order, no instant setting right all that is wrong. It is this which prompts so many to turn . . . to some hasty demagogue who offers a panacea which is to cure all the world's ills in a fortnight. Christ said to John in effect, My Kingdom is spiritual. Hence I must work through the individual. Only by regenerating the individual do I expect to regenerate the world". This is but an instance of how in almost every Bible truth with which he deals he finds something applicable to the needs of the people whom he addressed.

The hold his preaching had on those who gathered to hear owed little of its influence to rare gifts of fancy, imagination, or rhetorical effects. The writer had the privilege of hearing Dr. Dods several Sabbaths in his own pulpit, in the

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year 1877. There was no crowd at the doors waiting for pew-holders to be seated in order to find entrance, but a rather large audience room was filled with a congregation made up of all classes of the people. His appearance conveyed the impression of power, both mental and physical. He read the Scriptures in a rather strong, rich voice, and free from mannerisms. The comprehensive prayer was simple in expression, devout in tone, and more brief than was usual in many pulpits. He was still more apart from what is common when he came to the sermon. From the moment he read his text to the close of his discourse his eyes were fixed on his manuscript, and there was not a single significant gesture with hands or body. And the audience seemed as immovable as the preacher. Every eye was directed to the pulpit, whilst with fixed attention they listened to a train of thought based on the text, uttered in clear, simple language, and closely applicable to human needs. What Mr. Gladstone said of Newman's preaching might be applied with slight change to Dr. Dods. He said, "There was not very much change in the inflexion of his voice; action there was none. His sermons were read and his eyes were always down on his book, and all *that*, you will say, is against efficient preaching. Yes, but you must take the man as a whole, and there was a stamp and seal upon him; there was a solemn sweetness in his tone; there was a completeness in his figure; taken together with the tone and the manner which made his delivery such as I have described it, and, though exclusively from written sermons, singularly attractive."

The absence of gifts of delivery did not seem to hinder his power as pastor, but it doubtless accounts for his having to wait for six years before receiving a call. In that time he preached as a candidate before twenty-four different congregations in Scotland and England. In a village congregation, known to the writer, he received seven votes. In after years those who cast them made so much of their discernment that they became known as "the seven wise men". It is doubtful whether any minister that has risen to eminence could look back to half the number of such disappointments.

How he bore it all has come to light in a volume of letters just published, many of which were written about that time.* We are not surprised that he sometimes thought of turning aside to some other calling and more than once had his mind toward the colonies. But it is noteworthy that whilst there was much feeling connected with these discouragements, there was neither bitterness nor envy. These things might dampen his hopes, but they put no check on his industry. He read much, edited Augustine's "City of God", and among other things translated for a publisher Lange's "Life of Christ". He was for a time also employed in one of the large libraries of Edinburgh, where he got a knowledge of books such as is attained by few, all of which had a close relation to the work of his after life. Indeed it may be doubted whether he would have gone as far as he did had the way been opened to the pastorate on his leaving the "divinity hall". His patience, however, seems to have touched its limit when invited to preach for the church that called him. He writes to one of his sisters: "I think this must, and ought to be the last time I shall preach as a candidate. It passes in course of time from a humiliating to a mean and childish business". But there in Renfield Church, Glasgow, he found his opportunity.

His work was a success from the start and his influence soon began to reach far beyond his congregation. As a leader in looking at the Bible through the changed views of recent times, he was long suspected and at last charged with heresy. The trial resulted in the approval of the great body of his brethren and in an increase of popularity. Dr. Dods seemed to care little for the applause of the multitude. He was seldom seen on the platform at popular gatherings and was never in demand to furnish entertainment on such occasions, but when a great moral or religious question was agitating the public mind the people naturally turned to him to point the way of settlement. He took little part in mere ecclesiastical affairs and when offered the Moderatorship of the General Assembly modestly declined the great honor. When

"The Early Letters of Marcus Dods, D. D." \$1.50

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the Chair of New Testament Greek fell vacant in New College, Edinburgh, he was called to that position and filled it with distinguished ability till selected Principal of the same institution, which may be regarded as the most coveted honor in the gift of his denomination.

Dr. Dods made a large use of the pen, but most of the product went into commentaries and book reviews. And fortunate the volume that received his unqualified endorsement. We could name more than one book that leapt into popular favor by reason of his commendation. But his reputation, that carried him into positions of power, was largely built upon his preaching, which proves it to have been of a high order. Indeed, no volume of sermons that has appeared for many a day, will more amply repay the study of the young preacher than that on which this article is based. These "ample and spacious discourses" have that "fertilizing touch" which alone makes such reading profitable.

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