

# THE AMERICAN PULPIT

A Volume of Sermons by Twenty-five of  
the Foremost Living American Preachers,  
Chosen by a Poll of All the Protestant  
Ministers in the United States, Nearly  
Twenty-five Thousand of Whom Cast  
Their Votes

*Edited by*

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Editor *The Christian Century*



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## HENRY SLOANE COFFIN

It is difficult to envisage the multifarious activities and ministries of Dr. Coffin. Pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, he is also an active full-time professor in Union Theological Seminary. The inference would be natural that his relation to his church is that of preacher only, but such an inference would be completely mistaken. He administers an enormous organization of workers, volunteer and professional, and himself lives as close to his people in his capacity as pastor as does any minister who carries half of Dr. Coffin's responsibilities. As professor of practical theology his church affords his students a rare opportunity to test their teacher's instruction by observation, and by actual labor in the parish. For a "theologue" at Union Seminary to be invited to a place, be it ever so subordinate, on Dr. Coffin's church staff, is both an honor and a privilege of service greatly coveted. Dr. Coffin has built up his church on the principle of adapting it to the actual needs of the community. The "community" he conceives in the broadest and most democratic terms. He is under no delusion that because his church is situated in a wealthy section of Manhattan the whole of his community is wealthy and aristocratic. He too well knows not only that the East Side is hard by, but that in the houses of the wealthy there are many folk whose sociological classification is in quite different categories. For these he believes our Protestant churches must provide a ministry and a gospel. This problem of democratizing a Protestant church, of lifting it out of the narrowing class restriction which is one of its most unchristian characteristics, and of making it a humanly catholic institution—to this problem Dr. Coffin has set himself with a passion

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and an intelligence which leaves no ground for wonder at the success he has already attained.

As a teacher of preachers, Dr. Coffin is perhaps as deeply loved as any master of the homiletic art in any seminary in America. He draws upon what seem to be exhaustless reserves of sympathy and imaginative understanding of the young minister's problems, and thus binds students to him with the double bond of personal affection and professional respect. He has lived in New York City all his life, having been born there in 1877. Yale is his college, from which he received his A.B. degree in 1897 and his A.M. in 1900, in the latter year receiving also his B.D. from Union Theological Seminary. He studied in New College, Edinburgh, and the University of Marburg. Two pastorates mark his career, the first at Bedford Park Presbyterian Church, New York, and his present pastorate on Madison Avenue, which he entered upon in 1905. His professorship at Union synchronizes with his second pastorate. Active in denominational affairs, he has been a member of the board of home missions, and a director of the church extension committee of New York presbytery. The colleges and universities of the country offer no more hearty welcome to any preacher than to Dr. Coffin. A volume of his sermons preached to students was published in 1914 under the title *University Sermons*. Other books of his making are: *The Creed of Jesus, Social Aspects of the Cross, The Christian and the Church, The Ten Commandments, Christian Convictions, In a Day of Social Rebuilding, A More Christian Industrial Order, What Is There in Religion?* He is also editor of the well-known hymnal, *Hymns of the Kingdom*. Dr. Coffin has been honored with the D.D. degree by New York, Yale, Harvard, Columbia and Princeton universities.

## FROM THE NATURAL TO THE SPIRITUAL

By HENRY SLOANE COFFIN

*"To enter into life."*—Mark ix, 43.

Have you ever been haunted by a passage of scripture? To me there is an overpowering and inescapable earnestness in the words of Jesus, read a few minutes ago, in which he speaks with such intensity: Better for thee to enter into life maimed, crippled, one-eyed, rather than whole-bodied to be flung on the rubbish-heap and got rid of, as the city of Jerusalem used the valley of Hinnom, Gehenna, as a big incinerator to destroy its refuse. Wholeness was such a cult with Jesus—"I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly"—that one is surprised at his advocating crippling one's self—cutting off hand or foot or plucking out an eye. We forget his insistence upon the extreme difficulty of "entering into life," and his frank statement that to him the gate seemed narrow and the way straightened, and "few be they that find it," while the road to destruction is broad, and the gate wide, "and many be they that enter in thereby." One wishes he had not said that; it sounds harsh. But suppose he is trying to report truthfully the facts as he sees them, and to tell us that desperate efforts are necessary to

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“enter into life”? Truth-telling is always a kindness. Who would live in a fool’s paradise and suddenly discover himself bitterly mistaken?

And how exactly Jesus’ conception of “entering into life” corresponds with the scientific view of the way in which all creatures have evolved! It seems to be agreed that life on our planet began in the seas, and that the forest primeval was not that of which Longfellow sang in *Evangeline*, but its remote ancestor—the great masses of seaweed which swayed in the warm waters. In migration after migration, first plants, then living creatures dared the impossible and became dwellers on dry land. It was a momentous enterprise for denizens of the waters “to enter into life” on terra firma.

Look what was involved.

First, new breathing apparatus. There is oxygen in the water, and fishes take it in through their gills and through the membrane which covers their bodies. But on land skins had to thicken and the oxygen in the atmosphere be captured and passed into the blood through lungs. That involved a vast transformation.

Second, an improved method of motion. In the sea creatures may move freely in any direction, up or down, forward or backward, right or left, and the water upholds their bodies. On shore movement must be much more precise, the body must be compact and capable of holding itself up, and every muscle must respond to the control of the brain. A jellyfish may sprawl or float about in the sea, but it would be torn to bits on land. You and I, for example, exercise fifty-four muscles in the half-second that elapses between raising the heel of our foot in walking and planting it firmly on the ground again; and happily we do not

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have to think of any one of them, for all fifty-four move automatically in response to our desire to step ahead. A finer brain directing a more complex nervous and muscular system—that was a mighty advance.

Third, a new protection for the body against changes of temperature. In the sea the differences of cold and heat between day and night, winter and summer, are far more gradual and far less felt than in the air. Hence layers of fat and skins with hair or fur must be developed, and the animal's own blood-heat retained.

Fourth, a new family and social life. The waters form a cradle for the young, but on land they must be carried by the parent, or hid in a hole, or safeguarded in a nest—that is the beginning of home. In the sea most creatures let their young shift for themselves, with large losses, so that families have to run up to the thousands or millions, and there is no tie between parent and offspring. On land families are small, and there is personal care, and the dawn of social responsibility.

All which things are a parable; for "to enter into life" as Jesus conceived it was to advance from the natural into the spiritual, and closely parallel developments are necessary.

### I

A finer breathing apparatus. The oxygen of the spirit of God—the spirit of trust and hope and love—is diffused everywhere in small quantities through the ordinary atmosphere that men breathe. One could not raise a family or do business or have friends without trust, hope, affection. The more Christian a community is, the more of this spirit pervades its homes and shops

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and theaters and public offices, and without being aware of it people are living in the spirit. But the best town or countryside known to us is oxygenated with the spirit of Christ to no greater extent than waters are oxygenated where sunlight is falling on their surface. To enter into spiritual life is like coming up on the shore and capturing the far more fully present breath of the divine in one's own soul. Shelley has a phrase which expresses the atmosphere of Jesus' kingdom of God, when he speaks of "realms where the air we breathe is love."

We see a fish out of water apparently gasping for breath. It dies from too much air, and from air coming to it in a form it cannot utilize. Frankly, how would you and I fare in "realms where the air we breathe is love"—such love as the New Testament points to in the cross on Calvary? Could we do business in it? Or are we accustomed to only such diluted quantities that we should be fish out of water in an office or a factory or a store where it was the atmosphere? Could we function as citizens in it? Or are we so used to national selfishness and personal self-interest in forming our opinions on public questions, that we should gasp for breath? Could we work and worship in a church pervaded by it? Or are we so habituated to the vastly reduced amounts of the redemptive spirit of Christ that percolate through the churches with which we are familiar, that we should be entirely out of our element in a congregation which thought seriously with the mind of Jesus and spent itself with his self-giving to bring lives under his mastery? And this is only another way of asking: Could we breathe in God, who is love as Christ was love?

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Nature never takes her forward steps suddenly. There are fish today which have developed rudimentary lungs and come to the surface to breathe; they would die if you placed a net an inch below the top so that they could not reach the air. Have you and I such an elementary spiritual breathing-apparatus? Do we pray—consciously entering into God's thoughts and interests and sympathies? Do we accustom ourselves to the atmosphere of the New Testament by frequent excursions to it and by thinking out our current questions in it? Fishes evolved lungs, using part of their swim bladders, and so became dwellers in the ampler air of our sunny earth. Religion is a developable instinct—developable by those who try to breathe in and live by the truth and love and hope of Jesus. This is to enter into life—the life of God.

### II

Precise and controlled movement. There are many people who are morally sprawling, and with no more compactness and stiffness than a jellyfish. The rough edges of decisive issues tear them. When the young ruler began to ask his questions of Jesus, he was told, "If thou wouldst enter into life, keep the commandments." They are clear-cut "thou shalt nots" and "thou shalt." Movement on the terra firma of the spiritual forbids flopping about, and drifting this way and that, and letting currents carry us. A man must hold himself up on his own moral legs, and let his every motion be directed by conscience. "If thou wouldst enter into life, keep the commandments." And even then the young ruler would only have begun to move on the beach; there was more compacting of

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himself to be done if he would settle permanently as an inhabitant of the spiritual. He must disencumber himself of things which dragged and prevented his easy movement. Everything that one is and has must be swiftly responsive to the Christ-prompted heart. You recall Huxley's pointed dictum: "The test of being educated is, can you do what you ought, when you ought, whether you want to do it or not?" With some of us the trouble is lack of will-power; we cannot bring feelings and temper and power to heel. With others it is that our possessions and connections, like this young ruler's, are too spread out, like some flabby and distended octopus with numerous feelers and tentacles, and we are hopelessly entangled when we exchange the morally fluid existence for the decisive life of the morally solid and stable.

You and I say that we wish to be useful Christians, active and forthright builders of the city of God, through home and industry and citizenship and the church. Unquestionably we wish it; but do we *will* it? And have we a controlling will that gets us out to the task, that arranges our time, and plans our efforts, and manages our outlays? Wishing may do for aquatic existence where you can float along with a current or let the tide carry you; but willing is necessary on the terra firma of the spiritual. "I must be about my Father's business," "the Son of man came not to . . . but to." There is precise, controlled movement.

Or are we entangled? One can be tied up in social customs, and spend endless time and money on things that never advance the community or any individual a single inch. One can be entwined in one's own possessions—in their acquisition, their care, their enjoyment,

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their increase and never "enter into life," immersed in things, not in life. Jesus' advice to the young ruler would be the wisest possible counsel to not a few: "Sell and give." With less, many men and women would be far more useful. Possessions may impede personal service. Anything which one owns that is undedicated and not employed for spiritual ends is like a great limp tentacle which some sea-creature is trying to drag about on the shore. It must either be got rid of or transformed into a spiritual muscle.

Are we sprawlers and floppers and drifters? or conscience-controlled, self-upholding and self-propelling beings, moving precisely and firmly on God-given purposes?

### III

A better protection against atmospheric changes. The more developed a soul is, the more sensitive he becomes to drops in spiritual temperature. See it in Jesus' career. When he descends from the mount of transfiguration, where in prayer and in fellowship with the exalted spirits of the mighty past, he has been aglow with a passion to free mankind from sin, he comes into the despairing company of disciples unable to help that father with his possessed boy. The chill of their unbelief pierces him. "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" Again in the supper room he has felt the warmth of his disciples' loyalty: "Ye are they that have continued with me in my temptations"; but in the garden of Gethsemane, he felt a fall in temperature. The three on whom he had counted most went to sleep: "What, could ye not watch with me one hour?"

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And the point is that despite the changes in spiritual warmth, his spirit was not chilled and rendered incapable of generous and believing activity. He bade them bring the afflicted child to him; he went from the sleeping disciples to a second prayer even more acquiescent in his Father's will than the first, and then went to give himself up to the arresting guard.

How much affected are we by variations in temperature? How differently we talk in different groups—ardent with the enthusiastic, moderate with the conventional, cynical with those superior persons whose superiority is uniformly critical! In one community we are warmed to active Christian service: it is the atmosphere of the place; in another we are shivering or frozen into stiff inertia: we have no protection against pervasive indifference. With one friend we glow—his fervor is inescapable; with another we always remain in the temperate zone—an excellent climate for calm thinking and moderated action, but unfavorable to luxuriant growth and passionate self-abandonment; with a third we are in the arctic circle and show no more fruits of the spirit than are grown at Point Barrow.

There are few more searching tests to apply to one's self than this: How proof am I against these variations of heat and cold? Can I continue, year in and year out, "fervent in spirit, serving the Lord," in a household where the rest of the family are not interested in religion, in a place of business where my associates care for none of these things, in a church where the majority of the congregation are not more than tepid? It is not easy to raise tropical flowers and fruits in a Canadian winter; but it is done. It requires coal and

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a greenhouse so well built that it keeps the heat. To produce the graces and gifts of the spirit of Jesus in New York city, or in any other place you care to name, demands a large and constant supply of that spirit—fortunately always available—and a resolute conscience which retains the atmosphere of Galilee and Calvary, and excludes the intrusive chill of an unbelieving, unhoping, uncaring world. The spiritual thermometer on Mars hill, among those novelty-seeking, endlessly discussing Athenians, was many degrees below that on the mount where Jesus spoke the beatitudes, but Paul had his own furnace and protective covering, and his words kindle still. And as for Calvary—look at the taunting priests, the staring crowd, the dice-throwing soldiers, one fellow-sufferer mocking, and friends sobbing and hopeless. Could anything have been more congealing to faith? But from within Jesus uses for warmth, as we today employ the forests of a remote past in coal, the words of psalmists: “My God, My God, why?” “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” There is blood-heat retained against an outward drop to zero and below—blood-heat that warms across the centuries the most generous endeavors of today. Jesus entered into life, when another would have been spiritually frozen to death.

### IV

A developed sense of social obligation. One can fairly grade the world of creatures by the amount of devotion they show to their young or to their own herd. There are faint beginnings of this among dwellers in the water—among nest-building fish or those varieties where the mother protects the young in her

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mouth; but this sense of responsibility—call it embryonic conscience—has advanced by vast strides on the dry land. It is certainly the chief factor to be considered when we grade people spiritually, and estimate whether they have entered into life. Here is a devoted parent, but with no community spirit—an aquatic conscience. Here is a loyal patriot, but with no sense of obligation for the weal of other lands—a conscience akin to that of the wolf for the pack. Here is a business-man considerate of the few employees or immediate associates with whom he is thrown, but without imagination to feel the conditions and appreciate the state of mind of operatives in a mill whom he rarely sees and cannot personally know—a near-sighted conscience.

Here is a Christian, scrupulously careful about the expenditure of his income and eager to be generous, but unthinking of the conditions under which his income is produced, and never asking if he is worth to humanity what it costs to keep him—a class-bounded conscience. Here is a churchman interested in the work of his own congregation and perhaps in home missions, but questioning and disparaging foreign missions—a parochial or at best a nationalistic conscience. Here is a man with a general sense of obligation for others, which leads him to contribute to good causes, but with no feeling of responsibility to invest himself in service which sets him face to face with men and women who need what can only be communicated by direct touch of life on earth—a conscience akin to that of fish with an instinctive obligation to continue their species, but with no sense of duty to care individually for their kind. A congregation composed of fishy consciences

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will make annual offerings for the propagation of the genus Christian, but will not be a company of friendly men and women reaching out in personal contacts and drawing one by one their neighbors and acquaintances into the friendship of Christ. Where do you and I grade in social conscience? Did not Jesus, by his life and above all by that life laid down at Golgotha, reveal a more inclusive and more exacting social conscience—the all-embracing and self-giving conscience of God? To “enter into life” is to come up from this rudimental conscientiousness of the natural man—marine conscientiousness as opposed to terrestrial—into the conscientiousness of sons of God.

What daring it took in denizens of the water to attempt the impossible and try to become dwellers on terra firma! And what faith! Had they been able to forefancy what was involved—a complete remaking of themselves—being “born again”—would they have ventured? Had discussion been possible, how the complacent habitués of the sea would have argued with these crack-brained venturers! “A perfectly ridiculous project!” And as for the venturers themselves, how often must they have failed and been discouraged, and how many must have turned back or slipped back exhausted with trying, and how many must have had to part with fin or tail or scales or feeler or even some larger part of their fishy anatomies before they managed to live on shore! But today, we, who carry tell-tale reminders in our own bodies of the aquatic stage of evolution take life on land for granted, and earth is our native element and the only dwelling-place which seems to us natural. One hears a voice saying to those pioneers of eons ago: “I will give to thee, and to thy

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seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings." By faith they struggled, and for themselves and their descendants entered into ampler life.

### V

Between denizens of the waters and dwellers on terra firma there is a large group of amphibians, who are in and out of both. They are typical of ourselves—now in one element and now in another in our thinking and feeling and living. And notice that fear is the great factor that sends an amphibian back to the water. Frighten a frog or a turtle or a newt or an alligator, and it will make for the water, if it can. Scare any one of us and, like Simon Peter, we deny our Lord and dive back into selfishness. But there is an upward urge in creatures which makes them crave to reach the sunnier existence of the land, and there is a mysterious faith that this is somehow possible. Certain species, naturalists tell us, are coming ashore even now and continuing the evolutionary march which began millions of years ago. There is in you and me a craving for the spiritual—"We needs must love the highest when we see it"—and an instinctive trust in ourselves and in the universe that we can attain to such life as Christ revealed. We are scared out of it again and again; but faith battles with fear. Are we ready to yield to the ventures of trust and to pay the cost of daily struggle to enter into life? Maimed, crippled, one-eyed, if need be, merciless with ourselves, are we resolved to live? The alternative is the rubbish heap. This is the stern and exacting summons of the gospel of Christ.

But it is not the whole gospel. Jesus is no pioneering leader merely, bidding us follow him, even if it means

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mutilating ourselves to keep up with him. "I, if I be lifted up, will draw"; "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give"; "Ye will not come to me that ye may have life." A figure stands on the sunny shore calling to us frightened and doubting moral amphibians, fascinating us with the life he symbolizes and asking us to be his companions and stay with him, that with him we may become new creatures. He cannot relieve us of the necessity of struggling up and of struggling to stay up and of struggling to acquire the requisites for sons of God: but he draws and he holds—himself the strongest incentive to climb up and the staunchest preventive against slipping back—and with him we are acclimated and adapted to the climate of the kingdom of love. "He that hath the Son, hath the life."