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MY FIRST SERMON.

BY THE REV. DAVID JAMES BURRELL, D. D., LL.D.,

Pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church, New York City.

"Let her alone; she hath wrought a good work on me." Mark 14:6.

One Sunday morning in 1869, a young theologian sat in his room at Number 9 University Place in this city contemplating a sermon on the foregoing text, which he regarded as a masterpiece of clever composition. It was his first sermon, his "trial sermon," and not unnaturally he was eager to deliver it. The church bells had ceased ringing. There came a knocking at his door and, as if in immediate answer to his wish, a messenger announced that Dr. Joseph P. Thompson of the Broadway Tabernacle had been suddenly taken ill and somebody was needed to supply his pulpit. Would the young man preach? *Would he?* How true it is that fools rush in where angels fear to tread! The youth mounted the pulpit steps of the Broadway Tabernacle that morning with a degree of self-confidence that he has never been able to command even to this day. At the close of the service he was assured by some of the ladies present that his sermon was "simply beautiful"; he knew, without telling, that it was profound. His only misgiving was lest he had preached over the heads of his congregation. He realizes now that half a century has passed—for this is the fiftieth anniversary of that notable debut—that the sermon in question was "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null."

THE CHURCH'S DUTY TO THE COUNTRY CHURCH.

BY REV. W. H. MILLS, D. D.,

*Professor of Rural Sociology in Clemson College and in
Columbia Theological Seminary, S. C.*

An adequate supply of food, an adequate supply of men, these are the great desires of the human race. Its first desire is that it shall eat, and be filled. The second, that it shall have people enough to man its industries. It finds its warrant for these instinctive cravings in the words: "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it." Genesis 1:28. "I have given you every herb and every tree, to you it shall be for food." Gen. 1:29.

It is perfectly obvious that food must be produced in the country, since the raw material of our bread and meat in any large quantities cannot be produced in streets or cellars, or upon roofs, but only upon the surface of the earth. It is perhaps not quite so obvious, but is, nevertheless, quite as true, that our men must also come from the country. Partly perhaps, because the supply of food is nearer at hand, partly because the child is sooner able to assist in earning his own food; partly because nature asserts her sway, and the primary instinct is less controlled, the birth rate in the country is higher, probably and apparently, among families of the same class.

It is said the city is not even able to maintain itself. Hence, appears the supreme importance of the country home. The farmer has before him as a world-task the feeding of his own family and producing a surplus for the city, and the rearing of children, some of whom shall carry on his business through successive generations, and others of whom shall remove to the city.

To maintain, it may be, to improve, the family in the country must be the first consideration of both Church and State. Unless it is maintained, both State and Church must perish for lack of food. Unless it is improved, both State and Church

must eventually reach stagnation and decay. Our only safety as a nation, our only progress as a Church, lies in those policies that seek the upbuilding of the country. However wise may be our policy toward banking or ship building or any other industry, in the course of years, failure is sure unless our agriculture shall be equally wisely fostered. However wisely we may plan our policies of Home Missions or of Foreign Missions, they will eventually come to naught, unless the cause of true religion in the country home be fostered, for the very good reason that without the country home there will be neither support of missionaries, nor the missionaries themselves.

It is certainly not our business here to point out to the State its duty toward the farmer. That it is awake to the necessity of furthering his welfare is seen in recent legislation, as for instance, in the Federal Land Bank System, in the Smith-Lever act, in the establishment of agricultural colleges or schools in every State, and in the wealth of assistance with which it forwards his every project.

It is our business here to suggest what the Church should do for the farmer, that is for its own country church membership. First, the Church should *study* the farmer. Apart from any study or investigation made by the State or individuals, the Church should learn all it can about the farmer that it may the better serve him. Such a study should proceed along at least these lines: First, what are the conditions requisite for the maintainance of a proper family life in the country? Second, where in the bounds of the whole Church are these conditions best met? Third, where they are lacking, how may they be supplied so that family life may flourish everywhere?

That there are certain economic and social laws which more or less determine life in the country, we are all agreed, but how do they apply to the Church?

We are accustomed to assert, for instance, that those communities maintain a higher standard of life in which the larger proportion own and till the farms they occupy. If a study of our churches in Virginia and North Carolina should show

this to be true, should show such churches with a larger proportion of children than the city churches, with a larger proportion of these children baptized, with an increasing number of communicants, with increasing financial support of the Church, with a higher proportion of candidates for the ministry than should be found to obtain in country churches in the same or other States having a larger proportion of tenants in their congregations, then a condition requisite to the maintenance of family life and its improvement in the country, viz.: the ownership of the land occupied, would have been ascertained.

Again, certain conditions in the country in many parts have led to the removal of many families to the towns and cities. Has their removal made it easier or harder for the remaining families to maintain themselves in the country? Has the exodus from the country reached its height? Is it to be allowed to continue without effort to check it? Are the conditions of life in the country such that the best go away? The isolation and loneliness, that no multiplication of automobiles and telephones can fully remove, what effect do they produce on the man and his family? The hard, often dirty, physical labor that must be done by most farmers and their wives and children, that no gasoline engine or electric motor can possibly perform, is it hated and dreaded and shirked when possible, or is this hard labor recognized as fully compensated for by other higher advantages it secures? What is the attitude of the farmer in the country church to the country and to his farm? Does he wish his son to live there after him? Will he sell if he gets a good price? Are the people in the country more or less satisfied than the people in the towns with the conditions that surround them? Must history be always repeating itself, that people shall leave the country and crowd into the cities till city and country and nation perish?

Because we have not had a careful study of our country church life, is the very reason why such study ought to be made. Of course, here and there men are studying these questions, but as the Church is vitally concerned in their answer, I think

the Church ought to erect a Department of Church and Country Life, either in connection with its Home Missions, or perhaps better, separate and distinct from all other agencies, and direct this new agency to proceed to investigate the laws both of family and of Church life, in the country. Other denominations have already taken this step. Will we continue to lag behind? A few years ago we called one General Assembly, "the Country Church Assembly." Addresses were made descriptive of this or that phase of the life of the country church and pastor, but after their delivery no attempt was made to correlate them, to deduct principles from them and to formulate a policy for the Church. Conventions and conferences have issued hasty and ill-considered policies and programs for the country church, but our Church has not yet spoken. I am not at all asking that it shall adopt these, but rather that it shall make its own, after patient and mature consideration. Perhaps we may profit by others mistakes, but it is certain with actual loss in membership in many of our country churches, in the last ten or fifteen years, with the non-resident pastor in many more, and with the increase of tenancy, often negro tenancy, we refuse this study at our peril.

I would suggest in the next place that it is peculiarly becoming to the Church to unfold to the farmer the large possibilities of his life, and to encourage him to realize them. The Church has still the ear of the people as no other institution, and most fortunately so.

It can and does most effectively uphold the highest ideals and urge men to conform their lives thereto. Only the Church can teach that man's chief end is to glorify God, both here and hereafter. And the Church must declare also, how He is to be glorified, through obedience to His revealed will. It is His revealed will that men should be fruitful and multiply, should marry and be given in marriage, should establish families and rear children, so preserving a Godly seed. Now it belongs to the Church, it seems to me, to teach this, not only to all men, but most especially to men in the country. For simply because of its broader spaces, where children can better live and breathe

and play, simply because of the nature of the farm work, in which the child can at a very early age enter as a helpful factor; simply because of the farmer's dependence upon heat and cold, and moist and dry, that is, upon God, the country is the more favorable to the fullness of Christian family life. Such teaching would not hinder the development of family life in the city. It would the rather stir up families there to secure as far as possible the advantages of the country for themselves. And if the Church brought it, in dignity and beauty and power, to the attention of thoughtful Christian families in the country, it would serve as an anchor to hold them there. Being resolved then, to remain in the country, the better to glorify God by presenting to Him godly children, such families would seek more diligently to improve the conditions of life about them. Removals to town for the sake of better schools, or more agreeable society would be less frequent. Economical and social development would follow as a matter of course. There would be better roads and better farms, and better schools. There would be a richer social life and a deeper spiritual life.

Again, the Church is to show the farmer the fundamental importance of his work in producing food. Men do not live by bread alone, but they must have bread. It is the farmer who dispenses the bounty and providence of God in nature to a hungry world. Not the lawyer or the doctor, not the teacher or the preacher, not the carpenter or the weaver, but *the farmer* is the basis of society. He feeds us all. Logically, the first man must have been the first farmer. So Adam "dressed" the garden and "tilled the ground out of which he was taken." The Lord Jesus most wonderfully signalizes the place and importance of food when he would not send the multitude away hungry, but after he had taught them, fed them; and when he speaks of himself as the "Bread of Life."

Let the Church then, show the farmer how he works more intimately with God than other men, in providing men with food. Let him see that in assisting to furnish to the human race an adequate supply of food, he is peculiarly a co-worker

with God. Such a view of the farmer's life and work is, it seems to me, necessary to lift it above its undoubted hardships and toil.

Guided by these two considerations, the Church may say to its membership in the country and especially to the young men and women in its farmer constituency, "Here on this farm you may glorify God and do the work He would have you do, attaining here your own fullest development and best promoting here the welfare of your fellowmen." And they may reply, "For their sakes, the sake of my children and of my fellowmen—I sanctify myself."

Indeed I go further and suggest that the Church should show to the farmer that as it once pleased God to call his servants *out of* agricultural pursuits, as Moses and David from keeping sheep, and Elisha from the plow, so now it seems to please Him to call some of them to be signally His messengers in and through agriculture.

The introduction of reindeer into Alaska by Sheldon Jackson, the reforestation of a portion of China by John Nevius and Jos. Bailie, the breeding of better seed wheat in India by Sam Higginbotham, of a better corn in Brazil by Hunnicutt, are but conspicuous examples of successful efforts made by many Christian men and women, to feed the hungry, to show that it is as profitless to say "Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled and yet give not the things needful to the body" to a destitute community or people, as to an individual. Let the Church point out that as it was the scientific ministry of healing that most widely opened the doors of heathen nations to the preaching of the gospel, so it must be the ministry of scientific agriculture, now for the first time available that shall make this preaching permanent. Perhaps the early churches and missions perished because they were too much confined to the cities. They did not, because in that day they could not, build up a happy home life on the basis of a permanent agriculture. In our day such a family life is not only possible but must be attained. I would have the Church present these ideas to the people by voice and pen. I think this should be the con-

stant endeavor of the Department of Church and Country Life which I have suggested.

To secure in the mind of the farmer a right attitude toward his farming is surely a chief duty of the Church. "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he."

If the Church will bring over the farmers to right thinking about these larger possibilities in their vocation, it will go forward discharging its duties in its country church membership.