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→ SERMONS ←

MIGHTY IN THE SCRIPTURES.*

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Mighty in the Scriptures.—ACTS xviii., 24.

THE Scriptures are for the weak as well as for the strong. They contain milk for babes as well as strong meat for them of maturer years. It would be difficult to say how small an amount of Scriptural knowledge might be effectual to the generation of a true religious life and a holy walk with God.

One word of saving truth may be blessed to the renewal of a soul. He who has learned but to say with the publican, God be merciful to me a sinner; or whose ears have heard that priceless declaration that God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life, has caught the kernel of the Gospel. And if he has faith to trust it, the promise is his, and it shall be fulfilled to him in all its gracious meaning. However narrow his conceptions however weak his understanding, he shall experience what the wise and the learned and the great of this world fail to attain.

But though a single spark of heavenly truth may thus shine with a divine light, which shall savingly illumine and guide him whose eyes have been opened to behold it, there is given us in this blessed volume not a spark

* Preached in the Chapel of the Theological Seminary Princeton, Sept. 18th, 1887, at the beginning of the present session.

INAUGURAL DISCOURSE.

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WHEN Horace was writing his "Art of Poetry," he felt embarrassed with the apprehension that he who professed to teach the art would be regarded



W M Paxton

as assuming for himself a position of pre-eminence among poets. To repel this inference he reminds the reader that "a whetstone, though in itself incapable of cutting, is of excellent use in the sharpening of steel." Upon this same principle, one who accepts the position of an instructor may, without assuming any proficiency for himself, aim at the humble office of a whetstone — sharpening others while he wastes himself—content to be nothing if by his own hardness and dulness he may sharpen other intellects to the keenness of a Damascus blade,

or point a spear to pierce the hearts of the King's enemies. It is not, however, the humble instrument you have chosen, but the great department in which he is called to labor, that now claims your attention.

Paul Richter said, "Christ has lifted empires off their hinges, turned the stream of centuries out of its channel, and He still governs the ages."

But by what agencies has He achieved these wonderful results?

By His Church, in which He dwells with His all-conquering power;

* Dr. Paxton was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, New York City, from 1866 to 1893. See illustration.

By His Truth, which His Spirit makes "mighty to the pulling down of strongholds; "

By His Ministry, which goes into all the world and wins the hearts of men by His messages of love;

By His Pastors, who care for the flock, who lead the young by the tenderest sympathies, and "who go their way forth by the footsteps of the flock and feed the kids beside the shepherd's tents."

In other words the three great agencies included in this department of instruction, The Church, the Preacher, and the Pastor, are the very instrumentalities by which Christ has conquered in the past, and by which He still rules the ages.

These agencies are also the points to which the awakened interest and keenest thought of the present time are directed. The great life questions of the future gather around them.

By some it is said that the Church is growing feeble, it no longer goes forth with the might of conquest; that the ministry is shorn of its strength and utters no more the word of power; that the pastors are not now in sympathetic contact with the people; that the masses are falling off from the Church, and the common people no longer "hear the Word of God gladly." The anxieties awakened by such statements have so stimulated public thought, that there is perhaps now no subject which engages more general attention than the question how to bring the Gospel to bear upon the masses, and how to maintain the Church in its position of power and blessing in the world.

But a little thought will convince any one that the statements upon which these anxious questions are based are exaggerated. They originate usually with enemies, whose chief desire is that the Church may prove a failure, and are watching with a lynx-eyed jealousy to interpret every mistake as a disaster, and a single faltering step as senile weakness. Sometimes also these complaints come from revolutionists who wish to run the Church upon worldly principles. They are eager for change, and would retire the old scriptural methods and instrumentalities in favor of the novel expedients of the world's prosperity. Such statements once uttered are eagerly caught up and intensified by the alarms of timid Christians, who mistake every distant sound for a tornado; or by specious worldlings, who are willing to compromise to suit all tastes and preferences, and adjust both the principles and methods of the Church to the dominant tendencies of the times.

No, no; such alarms are needless. The Church gives no evidence of decay. It has been frequently shown by statistics that her progress for the last ten years compares most favorably with the former decades in her history. Her preparation and equipment for her work in the world, is more complete than in any former period. At this very moment "the name of Jesus is above every name," and His Church is the grandest, mightiest power this world has ever seen. It is true indeed that the Church in all its history has had its times of diminished as well as accelerated progress. It has had struggles as well as victories, its days of cloud and sunshine, its times of action and re-

action. But this cloud and struggle and reaction may not arise from inherent feebleness or ineffective instrumentalities, but from a combination of adverse influences without. Just here we think lies the solution of this problem: Allowing for such a measure of truth as may exist in these adverse statements, we may fully account for every diminution of growth in the present period by a single glance at the state of the world, in the midst of which the mission of the Church is now cast.

We live in an age in which a sudden accumulation of adverse influences has come in on the Church like a flood. The progress of science has opened up the whole world to the sphere of trade, and brought its most distant points into intimate connection. The limit of a man's business is no more the circuit of the village or the city, but the circumference of the earth. This has induced an intense spirit of competition, and stimulated an unnatural excitement. Speculation has grown to gigantic proportions. Christian principle, and even the sentiment of common honor, is disappearing as the struggle becomes desperate. The news, coming every hour from the ends of the earth, absorbs public thought, and cultivates a morbid craving for novelty. The increased facilities for rapid communication create a taste for travel, throw the populations of the earth together, disseminate vice, communicate the moral contagions of one people to another, transport the habits and customs of luxurious civilization to Christian countries, and bring the vices and abominations of heathenism to the doors of our own homes.

In our own country, a multitude of causes combine to increase and intensify these adverse influences. The recent war created a tide of vice and immorality which has swept through every city and village, and penetrated to the remotest borders of the land. The crowding together of vast masses of human beings almost in one common herd has made our great cities prolific centres of corruption, into parts of which it is scarcely possible for a gospel influence to penetrate.

The adoption of such various foreign elements into our civilization, has in many places displaced the old-fashioned, Christian home, with the happy family circle gathered around its warm hearth-stone, and the pastor a beloved guest; and has substituted in its stead the tenement house and the flat, or at best the brown-stone palace, with no warm hearth-stone, no Bible or catechism, but with parlors filled with gayety and fashion, with the card-table and the dance—a home in which the pastor has no welcome, and religion no altar.

To all this we must add the influence of the evil virus of religious doubt and sceptical opinion coming to us from foreign sources under the specious names of advanced thought, liberal opinion, and higher culture. The effect is to unsettle opinion, to break down the barriers of moral and religious constraint, to produce a contempt for law and government, to puff up the young with the idea that they are wiser than their parents, to encourage the expectation of change: that all that is old will pass away, that the age of reconstruction has come, and that all things in religion as well as in science will become new.

Now, grouping together all these adverse influences, we are able to see in a single view that the Church is opposed and hedged in by an environment of difficulties and obstacles, greater perhaps in their combination than ever before in her past history. She is doubtless able to meet and surmount them all. She is divinely organized for this purpose. Christ, her living Head, dwells in the midst of her. Her past history is the guarantee of her future success. But the agencies by which she works are human. It is, therefore, very unreasonable to expect that her success shall be instantaneous, or that her existence and work in the world should have prevented the rise and development of these evils. As well might we hold the officers of the Signal Service responsible for the occurrence of a tornado. Nor can we expect that when these hostile influences have arisen, she can strike down every enemy at a blow, or remove all obstacles with a single struggle. As her instrumentalities are human, she must have time and opportunity. It will require patience and conflict. But in the meantime it is most unreasonable to raise the cry of complaint, or to make charges of inefficiency. Surely it cannot be expected that the Church will make a uniform advance under all circumstances. An ocean steamer, no matter how effective the machinery, or skilful the management, does not make the same speed every day. Suppose a timid passenger, observing a diminution of speed, should say, "The ship is a failure, the machinery is giving out, we must have new adjustments and a different management or we shall never cross the stormy ocean." It would be easy to spread the alarm among the ship's company, and to raise vociferous murmurings. But to all this the captain readily answers: "Why this alarm? The ship is sound and strong, the machinery is in perfect condition, she has carried us safely through many perils. True, our speed is not so great to-day as yesterday, but do you not see that we are breasting a storm? Our diminished speed is not the result of internal weakness, but of great waves piled up by adverse winds; and even now do you not see how she rides every billow?" It is just so with the Church. The old ship is sound and strong, built by a divine architect, its machinery is planned by unerring wisdom and needs no change. Its administration is watched over by its ever-living Head, and requires no new adjustments. For eighteen hundred years she has ridden stormy seas, and risen above mountain billows. Just now she is breasting a storm. The sea of human thought and life is driven by contrary winds. But alarms are needless. She has surmounted every wave. The Master is at the helm, and it only requires the ear of faith to hear His voice, saying, "It is I; be not afraid." "Lo, I am with you always."

Such then being the inevitable conclusion to which a wide observation of the state of the Church and the world must bring us, the problem of the future is cleared of much of its difficulty, and the scope of our inquiry reduced to a narrower range. The factors for all our work for the good of the world must be the Church, the preacher and the pastor, and the question is how to organize and direct these agencies, so potent in the past, so as to realize their utmost efficiency in breasting this storm of opposition from without.

To this question there are some who reply : Adjust the Church in all its aspects and agencies to the circumstances of the times. This is an age, say they, of philosophic thought, scientific activity, and æsthetic culture. These are the great formative influences which are now working everywhere in our national, political and social life, shaping our literature and moulding our civilization. Let the Church, say they, place itself under these same formative influences. Let its architectural structures, its music and methods of worship be determined by the most approved principles of æsthetic taste. Educate pastors to develop the social spirit of the Church in harmony with the manners and customs of the most refined worldly society. Imbue the ministry with the highest spirit of philosophic criticism, and with a literary culture in sympathy with the most advanced progress. Train the preacher to cast the expression of moral and religious truth in the most scientific moulds, and to adapt the utterances of the Gospel to the choicest ideals of beauty, and to the most recent developments of refined taste. This, they say, will show that the Church is not a mediæval relic, floundering in the wake of an advancing age, but a living institution, abreast of the age, and in harmony with its ideal of progress.

The simple answer to all this is that which was given by the Apostles to the Sanhedrin of the Jews. "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto men more than unto God, judge ye." Who that has heard the command, "Preach the preaching which I bid thee," can take his text from philosophy, and his spirit from the dominant excitement of the times? Is not this reversing God's method? He placed His Church on the earth to be the great formative influence that is to mould and transform the world ; but this is a proposal that the world shall mould and transform the Church. Is it science or is it the Gospel that is appointed to be the power of God unto salvation? Is this world to be drawn to God by æsthetic taste, or by the attractions of the Cross? Is the Church a social institution in which fashion is baptized with the name of religion, or is it the temple of the living God, to be adorned with the beauties of holiness? Is the boasted progress of an age which leaves the Church of God in its wake, progress toward Heaven, or is it progress in the broad road that leadeth to destruction?

Setting aside, then, this and kindred proposals, the question returns, How are we most effectively to meet and resist the combination of adverse influences by which we are now surrounded? We answer, By accepting and employing God's own institutions, ordinances and agencies, just as He has appointed them, and so far as these instrumentalities are human to put them in a condition of complete equipment, and give them all the power and efficiency which training, qualification and skill can impart to human instruments.

In order to do this we are

First, To emphasize the Church as God's own ordained and organized institution, for the regeneration, education, culture and sanctification of the world. He laid its foundation-stone in Zion ; its walls composed of living stones are growing to an holy temple in the Lord ; He hath chosen it as His

abode, saying, "Here will I dwell forever." He has ordained its officers, commissioned its ministers, appointed its government, designated its functions. "He has set His King on the hill of Zion," and promised the "uttermost parts of the earth as His possession." He has "built His Church upon a rock," and His word of truth is pledged that the "gates of hell shall never prevail against it." Hence the efficacy of the Church as God's instrument for the salvation of the world is certain, no matter what influences may combine against it. To doubt is simply to disbelieve either God's power or His promise. To trust to any other means is simply dishonesty to God. Shall God's appointed agency fail of its destined results?

Hence we are to maintain the divine efficacy of the Church as against those who are prone to conceive of it as a human device—a society for religious purposes—rather than a divine institution ; its organization as an arrangement of human expediency rather than a divine appointment ; its government and administration as a matter of prudent policy ; and its forms and methods of worship as details which are to be conformed to the prevalent taste and fashion of the times.

To all such human perversions of the Church, we conceive that God's language is just that which He addressed to the Jews when they perverted the institutions of worship, "When ye come to appear before Me, who hath required this at your hands to tread My courts."

In the same manner also we must maintain the divine institution of the Church against those who are disposed to look upon it as an ancient family home for comfort and enjoyment, but who imagine that to work for the world's good they must go outside and form voluntary organizations to convert souls, to care for the young men of our cities and towns, and win the masses to give attention to the Gospel.

This is saying very broadly to the world, but perhaps thoughtlessly, that they prefer their own wisdom to God's wisdom, and choose to work by a human voluntary agency rather than through the Church which God has appointed to save the world. Perhaps it would be well to remember in these days that to men in old times who presumed to do divine work upon their own motion, God said, "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran ; I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied."

But whilst we bear our testimony to the Church in its divine authority and sanction as the one ordained instrumentality for the salvation of the world, we are also to see to it that all its agencies, appliances and methods of work are kept in a state of effective operation.

Hence we are

Secondly, To emphasize the ministry as God's chosen instrument for the utterance of His truth, for the enlightenment of the world, for the education of the family, and the salvation of souls.

There is a disposition in the present age to depreciate the preacher. Philosophy and science both claim to be the world's instructors, and they turn away from the preacher as an ancient, enfeebled champion whom they have

bound with withes, and shorn of his strength. But they have forgotten that the power of God is in him, and that no Philistine withes can bind his hands, and no gates of Gaza can withstand his strength when he rises in his might. No, no; it is the old story. Men may account the preaching foolishness, but "it is by the foolishness of preaching that God saves them that believe." It is "to them that perish" that "the preaching of the Cross is foolishness," but to them that are saved it is the "power of God."

The press also assumes to be the great teacher, but it has utterly failed to cast out the evil spirits from the world. They recognize the press as their companion and fellow-laborer, but not as master. Hence when the press attempts to exorcise the evil spirits, they turn as in times of old and say, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?"

We need not stay to argue. The proof is summed up in one divine witness, "The preaching of the Cross is the power of God."

The facts of history endorse this testimony. All the great victories in behalf of truth, civilization and salvation have been achieved by the preacher's power. It was he who carried the light of life into the deep darkness of the heathen world. It was the preacher who by God's authority and with God's word on his lips, stood and cried, "Let there be light, and there was light." It was he who smote the pagan altars, and they fell. It was when he spoke the heathen oracles grew dumb. It was at his advance that the popular shout, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians," died away from the ears of men. It was the preacher who carried the tidings of the resurrection to the Areopagus at Athens. It was the preacher who planted the banner of the Cross upon the palace of the Cæsars. It was he who converted the dark ages into the Reformation. He spoke, and the light of life came out of darkness, as the light of day came out of chaos. It was his word that rocked thrones, and broke the fetters of tyrants. It was he who laid the foundations of civil liberty, disenthralled and elevated woman, sanctified the family, reared our institutions of learning, and disseminated the principles of Christian civilization to the ends of the earth. A power that has accomplished such results is immortal. It has the perpetual youth of the living Word, and the quenchless energy of truth. Its power is as elastic to-day as when Paul preached on Mars Hill, or Luther thundered the resurrection note to a sleeping Church, or when the hills of Scotland echoed to the voice of John Knox, proclaiming "the crown rights of Jesus Christ."

But if the preacher is God's ordained instrument of power, we must not forget that the instrument is human, and may become feeble and ineffectual from a want of vital piety, or from deficient learning and culture, or from a worldly spirit, or from a lack of adaptation to the wants of the age; but upon the other hand it may be preserved in power by such training and education as will invest it with the attributes of efficiency requisite for the exigencies of the present conflict. Just here lies the responsibility of our theological seminaries. They are to train men to meet every exigency.

For this age we must have a learned ministry. The enemy meets us upon

the field of philosophy and science, and we must prepare men fully armed to accept the issue. We assume this as a matter of course.

But there are elements of practical qualification to which I wish specially to point.

First, we must train a believing ministry, a ministry that believes the Bible upon the authority of God, a ministry that goes forth in the confidence that this Word of truth is the Word of life, that it is the appointed instrument by which God works in the world, that through this Word of truth as a medium the Holy Ghost communicates His saving power to the heart, that it is the one single implement which God has put into our hands for the conversion of the world, that it is the one agency to which the power of God is bound by promise and therefore cannot fail. In this confidence the preacher will speak with power, and his message will carry with it a resistless energy.

We must have a ministry also that believes in the Son of God, that He became incarnate, that He suffered and died as the only expiation of human guilt. This is to be received not as a theological statement, but realized in a living experience in the preacher's own soul. He must have in his own heart a thrilling conviction that he himself was a sinner, that he was perishing, that he deserved to perish, and would have perished if Christ had not rescued him, and washed him in His atoning blood. This alone will enable him to go to thoughtless and sinful men and testify of Jesus with such urgency as will fasten upon their souls the conviction that there is nothing between them and eternal death but the blood of Jesus Christ.

If the truth is simply received into the intellect as a matter of dogmatic belief, it is laid away upon the shelf as a dead, inoperative thing. The preacher cannot seize and weigh it with effect, for he is ignorant of its value. He has never felt its kindling power himself, and therefore he cannot shoot it as a flaming arrow into the hearts of others. But if in his first study of the truth he is made to feel its quickening efficacy, it will abide with him as one of the forces of his life. The measure of every minister's power is just the number of these truths which he has received as living forces into his own soul.

Again we must train men for the times. Here we must distinguish. There are men who are made by the times, products of the times. Their character and opinions are the mere efflorescence of the times in which they live. Their voice is simply the world's echo, their principles are caught from the current sentiment of the hour. They compromise with the times, court the smiles of the age, and barter the truth of God for popular favor.

But as distinguished from these, there are men who are made for the times, to resist the times, to reform the times, to mould the age in which they live, courageous men who are not afraid to maintain the truth of God in the face of the world's opposition, men of settled convictions who cannot compromise with popular errors. These are the men the necessities of the Church demand. These are the men the world respects. The recreant who surrenders the truth of God at the challenge of a boasting scepticism should be

beaten with a scourge of small cords from the sanctuary. The dilettante who truckles for the world's favor receives the world's scorn. He alone has power to resist and control the age who can stand and say like John Knox, "The truth I speak, impugn it whoso list."

Again, we must train men to save souls. Whatever other ends the ministry may accomplish, if it fails in this it fails in the very purpose for which it was instituted. A military company which is trained simply for the purposes of holiday exhibition is of little account in the actual battle. So a ministry trained for learned display or pulpit exhibition is of little value in the real work of the world's conversion. The single purpose for which the ministry is commissioned is to save souls. The soul, the undying soul was the keynote of our Lord's ministry. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" This is the point to which all must concentrate. All else in the education of the ministry is of little avail if they are not taught that the one great aim of all their preparation and work is to save souls.

We must also emphasize the pastorate. The pastor is Christ's mediatorial gift. The shepherd is not more necessary to the flock than the pastor is to the Church. The pastorate is a divinely appointed function of the ministry for special purposes: to win souls by the attraction of personal sympathy, to sanctify the family by bringing the sacred influences of religion into every household, to educate the young by stimulating and guiding their instruction, and to gather men to the Cross one by one, through the attractive power of man on man, and by the mystic charm of individual influence. One of the complaints of this age is the disposition of the masses to stand aloof from the Church. If this be so, the pastor has lost his cunning. Just here the fault should be searched and the remedy applied. If in the churches the sacredness of the pastoral relation is ignored, and the minister regarded as a hireling instead of a mediatorial gift, if in our theological seminaries pastoral instruction and training is overshadowed and depreciated by the aggressions of the more learned departments, if ministers are sent forth without any thrilling realizations of the important issues and solemn responsibilities of the pastoral office, then it is no marvel that this potent arm of the Church's work is paralyzed, and that the masses stand aloof from a ministry that has no sympathy to attract and no charm to bind them to the Church of God. To meet this peril we must enthuse the ministry with the pastoral spirit. We must raise up and send forth men who are in intense sympathy with the poor, and who can carry the affection of warm Christian hearts into every struggling family and into every home darkened by sorrow. Then again will the blessing of the poor come upon the Church, and she "shall arise and shine and put on her beautiful garments, the glory of the Lord having arisen upon her."

But time would fail to pursue the subject further. These few thoughts we present towards the solution of the problem of the hour. The Church, the preacher, and the pastor are the factors with which we must work. They have been the power of God in the past, and we believe they are still the instruments of might by which Christ rules the ages.