

The Princeton Seminary Bulletin

Vol. XLI

PRINCETON, N.J., WINTER 1948

No. 3

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THE MINISTER, THE MAN OF ONE BOOK

ROBERT E. SPEER

A FEW weeks ago in a secondhand bookshop I picked up a copy of the rare little volume published in memory of Ezra Abbot. Ezra Abbot, as some here this evening will know, is one of the greatest textual prophets. The book contains lofty tributes by those who made the revised edition, the committee on which Abbot had exerted a great influence. There were beautiful tributes to the scholarship and character of the man by some of the greatest New Testament scholars of the time, starting from the humble beginnings on the little farm in Maine through all the difficulties of his early education until at last he began to be recognized for the place in scholarship which was really his as the Professor in the Divinity School of Harvard University. This little book is an indispensable part of a real working minister's library.

In Thayer's tribute we find the theme. Abbot's young mother, who was cut off at the end of seven years of motherhood, was learned in Greek. No wonder the son of such a mother spent the intermissions in studying the Greek Testament and read the same in after years. He could quote it almost at pleasure and refer to the very chapter and verse. Dr. Abbot learned it in all its vividness. Commend me to the man of one book, especially if it be the Book of books. And on that theme I would like to speak: The Minister, the Man of One Book.

The ministry is the only calling left in which it can be said that one book will satisfy. That was once true of all learned professions. My father, a lawyer, used to train young men in his offices. There was always a group of men studying law with him. There was only one book—*Black-*

stone's Commentary. That was true also of the medical profession. William H. Thompson's *Materia Medica* was the only book required. Abraham Lincoln became a surveyor from the study of only one book. That day has gone for law, medicine and engineering but remains the same for the ministry. The minister is meant to be a man of one book. One of Emerson's sayings is "Burn all your libraries and keep your Plato." Were we to do that, there would be great impoverishment. However, we must make all other books secondary and tributary in the life and work of the Christian ministry. That was John Wesley's counsel: "Like an arrow passing through the air, I want to know whence did I come and whither am I going. Let me be a man of this one Book."

THE SOLE RECORD OF GOD'S SELF-REVELATION

Here are the reasons why I think a minister should be "a man of this one Book."

First, because the Bible is the sole record of the self-revelation of God.

It is sometimes said that the Bible is the history of the Christian religion. That is both inadequate and incorrect. There is no such thing as the Christian religion. The Bible does not know anything about Christianity as a religion. This word "religion" is found only five times in the New Testament, used three times by St. Paul and the other two times in the Epistle of James where pure religion and undefiled has its definition, not religion. What is a religion? If we look in the dictionary we find that every dictionary and every definition conceives of religion altogether from the human side in man's attempt to

answer questions of the human soul. "Where did I come from?" "Where am I going?" It represents attempts of men, often good men, to answer those questions by Christianity. But Christianity is not a story of man's quest for God, but God's quest for man. The Old Testament, moreover is not a book about the nation which chose God, but a God who chose a nation. The following representative statements reveal this: "For God so loved the world . . .," "I am come that you might have life . . .," "The Father is seeking such . . .," ". . . but I have chosen you." It is God's great revelation of Himself. And the Bible is not man's discovery of God, but God's revelation of Himself to man. Only here do we find the self-revelation of God—not in nature nor in cosmos, nor in the religions of the world. Here in the solitary record we find the self-revelation of God, and because the Bible is that we should be men of one Book and should hold to that conception of the Bible today.

THE ONLY BIOGRAPHY OF JESUS CHRIST

We must be men of one Book because here is the only biography of Jesus Christ. All we know about him is here. Oh, yes, there is a bit in Pliny and on Egyptian papyrus. But there is no certain knowledge of Jesus Christ, as to who He was, His character, His teaching and what He did. Because we are sent out into the world to preach Christ we must be men of the book which tells about him. All that we know of the earthly life of Jesus Christ is there in a very few simple tracts. One would suppose we would have mastered them a long time ago. But all criticism is striving to determine whether we have found Him yet. Christ is manifestly greater than we have ever conceived. We are to preach Christ. That is our one theme, our supreme campaign, our life. What other book is there to which we have a right to go first and last?

THE CHANNEL OF GOD'S WORD

We should be men of one Book not only because it is the sole record of the self-revelation of God and the only biography of Jesus Christ, but also because it is a channel to us of the word of God. We say, "The word of God," "Hear now the word of God." Of course, the words in the Bible are the words of God, but also at times the words of the devil. Our Lord turned to a companion and told him that he spoke satanic words. The Bible's language about itself is not "the word of God," but only "scripture," the light of the institutes of God for the times to be mediated to us in our time. It does not call itself the word of God. The Bible is or contains the word of God—both statements are found in the Standard Catechism and the Confession of Faith. Fifteen or twenty times the Bible is referred to as scripture. Paul says, "The scripture that thou hast known from thy youth." If the word of God is to speak to us, it will speak to us through the Bible. It came in other ways in days past. In the third chapter of Luke we find, "And the word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness and so mighty grew the word of God and prevailed."

When we equate the word of God with His Book, any word of God coming to us today will come through this Book. Whatever Christian consciousness may do for us or whatever we or other Christians discover, the only authentic source is here.

THE GREAT BOOK OF THE INNER LIFE

We must be men of one Book because the Bible is the great book of the inner life of man, the life of the soul, and that which gives it the atmosphere in which it can live and grow. The Bible is the great book of the Christian spiritual experience. It is our Bible which furnishes us with our Christian vocabulary, the vocabulary of the soul, that the soul may understand

and speak about itself. We must be men of one Book so that we may speak to the souls of men. One comes back to the Bible as an adequate theological statement of religious experience and the devotional life.

There was a puddler in the steel mills of Pennsylvania, with a perfect command of the English language. Yet about the only English he read was his Bible. It was a treat to talk with him and to hear him pray. His English was of the King James Version of the Bible.

I attended the unveiling of a tablet to the memory of Walter Lowry, first Secretary of our Board of Foreign Missions, a man of 94 years, a leading lawyer of the community and known because of the richness of his speech about the Christian Gospel and the experience of the Christian Gospel. Preachers went to hear him pray and speak, and all of his words were gathered out of familiarity with the Bible. There is that relationship to the inner life which produces an atmosphere of reverence in which we need to live and work. The error of our Protestant ministry is the lightness with which it deals with really sacred things. Ministers waste their time sitting around telling ribald stories realizing not how much they are missing of that spirit of purity and reverence of which the Bible is full. One cannot get away from the sacred book of the inner life if he is to have guidance and direction as to the will of God.

George Müller, founder of a huge orphanage, was no softy. Part of his task was to raise money. When there was no visible means of support how did he discover God's will for himself in the city of Bristol? These were his rules: "(1) I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own. In a given matter nine-tenths of the difficulty is here and nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when one is in this state. (2) I seek the will of the spirit of God through the Bible. If the Holy Ghost

guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scripture. (3) Next I take into account that providential circumstances often indicate God's will and (4) I ask God to reveal his will. Thus from prayer to God and study of the word I come to a deliberate judgment according to my ability and knowledge, and if my mind continues in peace I proceed accordingly. I found this method always effective." Such is the testimony of real and great Christian personalities of our modern times.

The Bible is a book of the inner life because it is the great manual of prayer. It is a great prayer book, and books of common prayer and common worship are as nothing in comparison with the Bible. Just take the New Testament and go through it studying the place of prayer, the teaching of Jesus Christ about prayer, the example of our Lord and his great prayers. Study also the prayer life of the Apostolic Church, St. Paul's doctrine and practice of prayer.

One other aspect of the Bible is that it is an inexhaustible reservoir of thought for men, or according to a phrase in the King James Version, "the unsearchable riches of Christ." Not unsearchable, they are the searchable but the inexhaustible riches! When you think you know the Bible and work over it you will discover that you have only scratched the surface.

A minister must look after his mind. When a great British statesman was asked what book he would take with him into solitary confinement he replied, "The Bible." When people expressed surprise he answered, "Well, the Bible is the most thought suggesting book in the universe." How often does St. Paul come back to this as he speaks to us about giving Christ the preeminence in our thinking. He had our battle and he had to put a check on his mind and will. We need the help of the Bible precisely here. When our minds are free from tasks where do they go? Wool-gathering. Would that they would not gather anything worse than

wool, cotton, boll weevils perhaps! We need the Bible to bring our restless, questioning minds to heal so that we may go back to this great body of thought.

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST

For these four reasons we need to be men of one Book: because the Bible is the sole record of the self-revelation of God, because it is the only biography of Jesus Christ, because it is the great book of the inner life of man, and because of the example of Jesus Christ. If He could not get along without the Bible how can you and I do so? The Bible is the only book He knew anything about. He had not educational advantages such as Saint Paul and contemporary Eastern leaders. But He knew his Bible and on the Easter Sunday evening when they made their way out to Emmaus he began with Moses and the prophets to relate the facts concerning Himself. He had no Bible with him but he began with Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament and one needs only to read the Gospels to see what place they filled in his life. The miracles and teachings of Jesus were founded on the Old Testament. It spoke and wrote of Him, what He did was the fulfillment of the ideal life of Him who was to go and hang on the cross. How explain that cry of His which so puzzles, "My God, my God why has thou forsaken me," as though you could divide God and as though one part was forsaken by the other. Moreover, He says, "My Father had never left me alone," a quotation from the Twenty-second Psalm. The Lord's mind was just going over, on the cross, sayings from the pages of the Old Testament. Words from the Aramaic came out, and he died with the Old Testament on his lips, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." Christ did not own a Bible; he was too poor. If the Bible was so central in his life do not imagine that it can be less in our lives.

We should be men of the Bible because

the really true, fruitful, good ministers of the Gospel, whom we have or have not known, who most clearly approached the ideals of what a Christian man should be were just that.

Alexander Whyte was a man of the Bible and the Bible pages spoke to him. He wrote: "As Coleridge says, my Bible always finds me, and I always find myself in the Bible, till I am rejoiced above all measure to see and to say continually that He who made me must have had my Bible made for me. As I sit and write these lines I am surrounded and overwhelmed with a houseful of books of all kinds; but the longer I live and the older I grow, they are less and less in my hands, and take up less and less of my remaining time. And that is so because so few of them seem at all to know me, and to be able to speak home to me. . . . There is but one Bible. And my Bible to me is complete and supreme and alone. Till, the longer I live, the more I concentrate upon my Bible, and upon my few books that draw their truth and their power from the Bible and from the Bible experiences and Bible attainments of their great authors. Every time I open it I find Jesus Christ in my Bible. And He answers to me in every word He speaks and in every deed He does. And above all His words, He answers to me in His own blessed words of pardon and peace to me. And above all His deeds, His death on the sin-atonement Cross for me. Christ and His sin-atonement blood; Christ and His imputed righteousness, as the Apostle always has it; it is because my Bible is so full of Him, and of these two supreme things of His—it is this that makes it the Book of all my books to me."

I would not have a deeper desire nor more earnest prayer for those who go out from this seminary than that you should be men of the Bible, that the Bible should be the mould of your mind and the inspiration and the substance of your message, that you be men of one Book.