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THE NEW THEOLOGY.

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PART III.

ONE of the constant cries of the New Theologians is, "Back to Christ"; "back to Christ." "Back," say they, "behind the views of the Old Theologians of the present day"; "back behind the dogmas and creeds of the churches"; "back behind the mediaeval church"; "back behind the fathers"; "back behind everybody and everything to Christ himself, the supreme authority in religion." They make the startling charge that the true Christ has been lost; that the church, as it has come down through the centuries, has left him behind; that the Christ now found in the creeds and theology of the present day is very different from the Christ whom the apostles knew and whom they describe in the gospels; very different in his character, teachings, works, and ultimate purposes in regard to the human race. Of course this cry, at first view, is very plausible, very pious; a cry to which, in itself considered, nobody can object; a cry expressive of what every Christian must approve—supreme devotion to Christ, and complete submission to his authority as the great Prophet of the church, and the only trustworthy source of religious knowledge. It presents the New Theologians in the attractive and conciliatory aspect of religious teachers who wish to discard all human opinions and speculations, and to go back behind them all afresh

DECADENCE IN PRESENT DAY PREACHING

BY PROFESSOR R. A. WEBB, D. D.

In multiform and manifold ways, it is being confidently affirmed that the pulpit is a decadent institution; that present day preaching is on a descensive scale; that it will not take long to reach the bottom at the present rate of down grade; in a word, that the imperial sceptre which the preacher of the past generation swayed over society and conscience, over thought and character, over life and conduct, is dropping nervelessly into dishonor, discredit, and general impotence.

They are saying that the average sermon is not worth listening to; they are saying that there is very little present day preaching which grades up even to that median line called the average; they are saying it emphatically and aggressively; they are saying that, not only the men of thought, but also the men of the masses, are staying away from the churches because of the emptiness of the sermon which nowadays is inflicted upon them.

It is alleged that the triumphs of the ministry have always been more apparent than real; that the practical spirit of the age has punctured its glory by revealing its shams.

It is alleged that the highly fascinating literature of our age, coming in like a flood, has hopelessly drowned the droning preacher and his drowsy sermon; that this literature is beating the pulpit at every point—in exposition of God, in interpretation of life, in exhibition of duty, in portraiture of sentiment, in charm of style, in general entertainingness and instructiveness; that the man with the pen has driven to the rear the man with the sermon.

It is alleged that the man of the study has gone, in the quest of truth, beyond and below the man in the pulpit, and despoiled him of his power by convicting him of ignorance; that it is no longer true that the priestly class is the most learned class; that philosophy and science have put to an open shame the very scholarship of the preacher; that, in his despair, the man of God has

ceased to be an instructor and has become a mere poetizer, rhetorician, exhorter, even when he is at his best.

It is alleged that the very conservatism of the ministry has shorn it of its former power by causing it to lag in the rear; that he is not a progressive; that he clings to a dead Bible and a withered creed; that he preaches a defunct religion and an antiquated morality; that he stands in front of advancing ideas; that he irritates men by calling them sinners, by criticising society, by finding fault with business men; that by his doctrine of other-worldness he is nothing more than a growling pessimist with respect to the world which now is; that men have simply grown weary of his checking, complaining, blaming voice, and have turned their ears to more encouraging sounds.

It is alleged that the very liberalism of the pulpit of to-day is the cause of its weakness; that the preacher has shifted his doctrines and treated his principles like a "nose of wax"; that he has been all things to all men; that he has become a vacillating time-server; that he has put his Bible and his creed, his religion and his morality, into debate, and altered them at the dictation of his opponents; that he has gone after the world as a concessionist, and now is weak enough to do "the baby act" when he finds that his conciliatory policy has met the fate of all compromises.

It is alleged that the whole fault, or the primary fault, is with the mode of making preachers; that those factories of preachers, theological seminaries, are for some reason "turning out" an inferior article; that these factories have learned to do hasty and shoddy work; that what they teach is poor; that the manner in which they teach it is poorer; that the course of study is too long or too short, too tortuous or too direct; that the beneficiary system (the system of aiding young men financially in their preparation for the ministry) is sapping self-reliance, self-respect and all the stronger elements of manhood; that the weaklings of the pulpit are made by the schooling they get; that the man in the professor's chair is the real cause of a decadent pulpit.

It is alleged that the cause of retrogression is deeper still; that the very type of men who enter the ministry nowadays is of inferior quality; that he comes from the humbler walks of life, from the embarrassed strata of society; that he is by nature incompetent, not only a dullard, but incapable of being anything

else; that for some reason, for various reasons, God has ceased to call the very flower of young manhood into his ministry; that he discontinued years ago; that there is now in the pulpit "an overplus of weaklings" and an underplus "of brain and brawn"; that in the Southern Presbyterian Church there are not more than fifty first-class ministers; that for this reason more than a majority of its leading pulpits are vacant; that these splendid churches are pastorless because Southern Presbyterian ministers are a palsied set; that from the quality and diligence of the candidates offering it would be senseless to expect anything more than respectable mediocrity anywhere, even when the height of capacity has been touched.

So for one reason or another—whether on account of the spirit of the age, or the literature of the times, or the scholarliness of the critics, or the old-fogyism of the conservatives, or the new-fangledisms of readjusting liberals, or the blundering seminaries, or the innate incompetence of the candidates—for one reason or another the complainants are charging that preachers and preaching are on the down grade. This is pointed to as the explanation of vacant pulpits where giants once stood and preached; of empty pews where congregations once were great; of slim prayer-meetings, which once were large; of meagre results where plans are elaborate and expenditures are large. The complainants are contrasting us who now are, with Thornwell, Leland, Smyth, Plumer, Howe, Adger, Miller, Ramsay, Rice, Dabney, Peck, Hoge, Murkland, Breckinridge, Robinson, Moore, Irvine, Welch, Waddell, and the host of others who but recently made the Southern pulpit luminous, and asking, What has become of the mantle of the fathers?

The indictment is awful. True or false, it burns like *aqua fortis*. True or false, it injures that which is dearer than the heart which beats behind our ribs—the cause of Christ.

True or false, it is a stinging rebuke, a thunderous appeal, to the minister of to-day; it challenges his mettle; he is told that a splendid glory is fading in his hands.

If the paling of this pulpit splendor is due to the "spirit of the age," whatever that may mean, he must conquer that spirit; if to the fascinations of literature, he must triumph by making the sermon more vital; if to the learning of the fault-finder, he must become more learned; if to the timidity of his conservatism, he

must become bolder; if to the rashness of his progressiveness, he must become more cautious; if to the theological schools, he must galvanize or revolutionize them; if to his native incompetence, the issue is too vital for him to fail to pray to Almighty God for mighty men who can uphold his cause. He must retrieve the day. He must save the prestige of the pulpit. It is worth all the gold of Egypt, all the gold of the world. He is debtor to his vocation in the amount of the totality of his being. There is no spectacle more tearful than a little preacher in a big pulpit; and every pulpit is a towering pulpit if it be occupied by a towering preacher.

The complainants are both outside and inside the church. If I mistake not, their number is increasing; their tone getting sharper. Angry retorts and biting philippics against them as soreheads and detractors, sensative apologetics and adroit panegyrics upon ourselves as the victims of unfortunate criticisms will not meet the situation, will not turn the tide. The client who has himself for his attorney has a poor lawyer for his cause. Our chief aim is not to stop the mouths of accusers, but to raise the power of our preaching ability, to strengthen the dynamics of our pulpits. To this end we may admit that where there is much smoke there is some fire; that however good preachers we may now be, there is still room for improvement; that the clamor for better preaching is legitimate, and, if possible, must be met.

The situation calls for calm reflection and judicious examination; we must not get hysterical over detraction, nor fill our literature with injured self-praise; we must think accurately and feel truly over the problem which the complainants raise to our disgruntlement. There is some truth in the charge, and there are some causes which have operated slowly, but logically, to the production of the result at which many church-going people are now fretting.

1. For the last twenty-five years and more our congregations have demanded of us little sermons—sermonettes rather than sermons. They have cut down the time of the sermon to thirty minutes, and now disparage the son because he cannot preach in half an hour the sermon it took his father a full hour to deliver. Of course he cannot. It takes time to do anything. If an audience will not give the preacher time enough to order his thoughts, to make his expositions, to centralize his theme, to elaborate his

arguments, to make clear his principles, to make forceful his applications, the result must be qualified by this lack of time. It is as ungenerous as it is senseless to base big expectations upon a meager opportunity. To be sure there is a difference between time and eternity; and there is the type of preacher who is profligate in the consumption of time. He has no right to work too slow; neither ought he to be rushed at a speed which sacrifices efficiency. On occasions, four or five preachers are "put up" at a time, all limited to ten minutes each, in the sheer hope that the sum total of the addition may be worth something, when, as a matter of fact, the occasion is completely lost, because each unit was sacrificed in the effort to do something in next to no time. Many good sermons have been preached in thirty minutes, but I venture to say that no truly great sermon ever was preached in that length of time. The effect of putting on these time screws is to prevent sermonizers from planning and attempting great discourses.

But this is only one of many ways in which the sermon has been reduced to the sermonette; and if our preachers have become little preachers, it is at least partly because they are shut up to attempting, habitually, little sermons.

2. Conditions of to-day have made the preacher a man of parochial affairs. His church has become a departmental institution, and all sorts of complicated executive questions lay their imperious demands upon his time and thought and heart. He has become an engineer with a more or less elaborate machine on his hands. In his parish there are from six to a dozen "societies" whose operation and efficiency, whose peace and harmony, are his care—a burden which his fathers did not have to bear. There is attached to his church both a parlor and a kitchen, and on reception days he must perform the offices both of a belle and a cook. There is always a deal of "women's piddlings," of which he must needs be the factotum. If you attend to the handful of notices which he reads on Sunday morning, you will observe that there is announced one "meeting" for each day in the week, and every one of these "meetings" means a slice of his time and thought and energy. He has his legitimate pastoral duties, which are consumptive enough, but in addition he is required to figure at every "social function" given by any member of his congregation, and to maintain the social prestige of his flock. Consequently he

is always in "straits" for a sermon. His pulpit preparations are controlled by the emergencies of the hour. He learns to do "*extempore* winding." He perhaps grows fluent at superficial and platitudinal talking. He loses the power to think, and learns the art of being shifty. He calls in sermonic "helps," and puts an enfeebling crutch under his arm, and justifies it by the emergency of the situation. His habits of study are broken. The congregation detects the chaffiness of his preaching, and the day of his humiliation has begun.

In my judgment, it takes two days in which to prepare a sermon—one day to load the mind by reading and reflecting, and the second to write and study the manuscript so that the sermon can be delivered without slavery to the paper. Every pastor has two such sermons to prepare each week, and a prayer-meeting lecture in addition, which latter requires all of one day. How can the present day pastor, encumbered with a multitude of parochial affairs, command the time and the quietude necessary for worthy pulpit preparation? Is there any clue here to the fact that church-going people have nearly quit the second sermon? That generation of magnificent preachers which has nearly entirely passed through the doors of the church militant protected themselves against an indefinite multitude of modern parochial engagements. When but a lad, that prince of preachers, Dr. John W. Pratt, advised me to accept the responsibility of two sermons each week, the regular weekly prayer-meeting lecture, and the logical pastoral duties of my flock; to refuse absolutely everything else; and upon these things to do my level best; he assured me that time given to anything else would be time filched from my sermons, which would be to their serious hurt in the long run. How can there be the best preaching with so much congregational "dodaddling"?

3. The sermons of the old masters of the pulpit were doctrinal; those of our modern sermoneer are practical. The former were discussions; the latter are exhortations. The former defined principles; the latter define conduct. The former urged men to believe something which should be the master idea of their lives; the latter urges men to do something which shall be the master passion of their souls. The former reasoned to the creation of convictions and motives; the latter applies with a view to shaping career. The burden of the former was the work of Christ; the

burden of the latter is the work *for* Christ. At the first, the son's triumph seemed signal; he grew bolder with each compliment; he presently swung entirely loose from his moorings and declared, "Christianity is not a dogma, but a life"; he created indifference to doctrine; he carried indifference into positive hostility; he drifted into a crusade against theology. But the son's temporary triumph was due to the premises which his fathers had laid down, and, his fathers passing away, he now confronts an audience which is distinctly dissatisfied with his preaching, is drifting out of his church doors, and growing more and more irresponsible to his appeals and entreaties. He is restless, and they are restless. Pastorates are formed and dissolved with startling rapidity. The congregation, with respect to the single thing of worldliness, has not only gone beyond the preacher's control, but grown contemptuous of his advice on the subject. I cannot help thinking that expressions of indifference to theology from religious teachers, attempts to banish it from the sermon, or to avoid it in pulpit ministrations, is a cause of weakness in present day preaching. I can conceive of a man having a theology without a personal religion, but I cannot conceive of his having a religion without a theology. As long as he remains a religious being, or a thinking being, he must have, he will have, a theology of some sort. To ignore this deepest demand of head and heart, to deny to men philosophical expositions of God and sin and salvation, to demand that they be satisfied with mere rhetorical superficialities of a pulpit speech, I must regard as a losing policy. The recognition of the causal relation between doctrine and life is an imperative desideratum. The times call for the strongest theology the human mind can construct. I must think that a weak theology makes a weak preacher.

Of course the task is enormous. The preacher who has lost the art of eloquent, entertaining, instructive doctrinal exposition must learn it again. The hearer who has been taught to despise dogma must be propitiated and recovered.

The disparaged situation challenges the preacher. He must quit "beating the bush," and rise to the consciousness of his awful vocation.

May God bless the preacher, whom I love with passion, and admire more than all princes of earth!

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