

LECTURE XVIII.

PREACHERS CHARACTER WITH HEARERS.

THE hearers' apprehension of their minister's character is a most important element in his power of persuasion. If I be reminded that this is a truth belonging rather to pastoral theology than to rhetoric, I shall reply, that the element is one which it is impossible to separate from the effectiveness of sacred oratory. The pastor's character speaks more loudly than his tongue. This consideration is immeasurably more weighty in the case of the sacred than of the secular orator. Aristotle¹ announces this maxim, that the latter must establish with his auditors a character, first, for discretion, or knowledge and judgment; second, for probity; and third, for benevolence, or good-will toward them. If the speaker is suspected of ignorance or infirmity of judgment, his advice cannot carry weight and his arguments will be despised. If he is evidently intelligent and shrewd, but of doubtful integrity, the plausibility of what he advances will be felt; but the more ability he shows, the more will the people fear to commit themselves to his opinions; for they have no guarantee of moral principle that he is not employing these forces of his genius, manifestly so powerful, to

¹ Rhetoric, B. ii., ch. 1.

entrap and injure them instead of to benefit them. His advice, moreover, will probably be corrupt, unworthy of a virtuous people, and, because immoral, foolish in the end, even if it be kindly meant. If to the assurance of his mental ability to judge with discernment, and of his probity, guaranteeing the faithful and righteous use of his knowledge, be added a conviction of his affection and benevolence toward his hearers, prompting him ardently to desire their benefit; then they feel a strong presumption, in advance of the consideration of his arguments, that they should adopt his opinion. In popular phrase, he who has secured the reputation of these three qualities "has the ear of the people:" they are prepared to hear him favourably before they know what he will say.

The personal glory of success in his office should be the least of the ends which the pastor has in view; yet success should be desired for the gospel's sake. Among those who reach a respectable mediocrity and are not obstructed by some glaring blemish of manner, the difference between the acceptable and popular, and the unsuccessful minister, is chiefly caused by this character. The former succeeds, because he has made his people love and trust him. His judicious social intercourse, his virtues, his affectionate zeal in their welfare, and especially his sympathy with their sorrows, have won their hearty confidence. The doctrines we preach are naturally distasteful to the heart of man, and foolishness to his understanding. We are required to spend a life in the iteration of the same truths, until all the charm of novelty is gone. The most brilliant mind would fail to retain the attention of a charge, during a

whole ministry, by the mere force of mental interest: the attractions of love and confidence must be added. Without a sacred weight of character, the most splendid rhetoric will win only a short-lived applause; with it, the plainest scriptural instructions are eloquent to win souls. Eloquence may dazzle and please; holiness of life convinces.

Now, the fact that the preacher's work is spiritual enhances a thousandfold the force of the maxim of the pagan philosopher. Your professed motive, young gentleman, is not mere patriotism, but something unspeakably higher and purer. Your ends are not temporal and finite, but everlasting and immense. They are, indeed, humane; for the good to which you seek to persuade men is one so splendid and rich, that the soul faints with excess of joy before it fully comprehends it; the evil from which you seek to rescue them is one so frightful, that the heart shudders at the first apprehension of it. But your work is far more than humanitarian: you are the messengers of that supreme and infinite God "of whom and through whom and unto whom are all things, to whom belongs glory for ever and ever." You are the appointed instruments "to make known by the church the manifold wisdom of God unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places." To you is committed the honour, before men and angels, of that display made in redemption of the most sacred moral perfections of God. The sword of the spirit which you handle is two-edged: it kills where it does not make alive. The cordial which you offer to the lips of dying men is a "savour of death unto death" if it is not made a savour of "life unto

life." The time and opportunity allowed you to rescue the perishing are both precarious and limited; for the objects of your zeal are "standing in slippery places," over the flames of perdition. The professed motive of your ministry is at once the most disinterested, tender, urgent and sacred by which a human soul can be swayed; for as the prospective woes which excite your compassion toward your fellow-men are the most frightful, the divine blood and grace which you exhibit are the most hallowed objects which man can conceive.

It is exceedingly obvious, hence, that there would be a monstrous solecism and guilt in your marked incompetency for such a ministry, in your dishonesty, or in your inhumanity in it. What is the inconsistency, the falsehood of that man who fills such an office heartlessly for hire or applause, or merely because it is his promised task, and his credit does not permit its entire neglect! How utterly must the enacting of such a lie before your hearers blast every good effect of your pretended persuasions! Your position as gospel-herald, then, exacts of you the qualities of discretion, probity and benevolence, in a far higher sense than they are required of the secular orator, and by far more solemn motives.

1. Your competent knowledge and good judgment must be such a soundness of mind as will command the respect of all men, with a real mastery of the theology of redemption. A frivolous, weak, illogical mind will detract from the weight of all that you could say for religious truth. Even if this indiscretion is shown by the minister in his secular affairs, week-day intercourse, and non-professional opinions, it will endamage the effect

of his pulpit labours. You owe it to your divine Master to show such sound discretion always, that no man can have pretext, when you assume toward him the position of spiritual monitor, to remind himself of any childishness in your secular affairs, coxcombry or levity in society, or crudity in literary opinions. If you thus weaken your own message to him, you are an unfaithful, not to say a treacherous, servant. But especially in your own department, that of evangelical history and doctrine, you are sacredly bound to display such competency, such maturity of opinion, such faithful and honest research, as will make every fair-minded hearer respect your theological *dicta*. Here you must show such good sense and acquirement, as will make your most cultivated hearer feel that you are a respectable and trustworthy guide in your own field. Does any one object to this as a hard saying? Does he complain that I hold him responsible for those gifts of genius and that peculiar ability which nature alone bestows? I so far admit this statement as to avow that a fool has no business in the sacred office, whatever may be his zeal or his opportunities for training. But plain, manly good sense, inspired and dignified by true piety, will always come up to my standard. You have no call to affect the universal genius, "the admirable Crichton," master of all possible arts. You need not pretend to talk agriculture, physics, politics, belles-lettres, fine arts, with the experts in these various branches of knowledge; but you may honestly avow, when they are the subjects of conversation, that you have not judged it your business to master them, and may keep your mouth closed. Such an attitude is always respectable.

But when the votaries of these arts and sciences approach the theology of redemption, show them that there you are master of them all. To do this, you only need constant and faithful study of your own department, and this, I repeat, it is your clear duty to bestow.

2. That virtue which in the secular orator is probity, or political integrity and truthfulness, must rise in the sacred teacher to sanctity of character. This will include, of course, a spotless honesty and fidelity in all earthly relations and transactions. "A bishop must be blameless."¹ But this integrity every common Christian is expected to show; many unrenewed men can claim it. The pastor must rise far higher; he must exhibit a symmetry and elevation of Christian character, an exaltation above all carnal ambitions, which will make him venerable and lovely in the eyes of his flock. Such a character clothes his instructions with a weight and sweetness which no talent or learning can give. The hearers feel that they have the guarantee of a purity which it would be both folly and crime to impugn, for at least this conclusion, that the opinions the good man utters are certainly believed by himself after his most faithful investigation.

3. The third quality, good-will, must rise above the humanity and the benevolence of the good citizen to an ardent love for souls. The pastor should be recognized as one who affectionately hungers for the spiritual good of his charge. His admonitions should be received by them as the outpourings of a compassion which cannot be restrained. He sees the worth and danger of their

¹ 1 Tim. iii. 2, etc.

souls in the light of eternity, and his eloquence is inflamed from the very altar of God.

This character is sustained partly by the pastor's demeanour out of the pulpit, by his daily and sustained anxiety to save souls, and by the constancy of his labours for that end. If a solemn sermon be followed by an idle, worldly week, the people will feel that the apparent earnestness of the preacher is professional; and if he be yet more exceedingly fervent, they will only applaud his skill as an actor the more, disbelieving while they applaud. Here, let me say, is a sufficient argument for "preaching the gospel from house to house." We sometimes excuse our reluctance to this arduous work by pleading that there is nothing we can say in the household, or the private interview, which we have not said with more connection and force in our sermons; that if we introduce the topic of personal religion, we shall but awkwardly utter, in a "parlour sermon," what has been so much better said already in public. The answer is, that, however constrained, awkward and lame our private appeals might be, they would gain this capital point—they would convince men that we were in earnest in our pulpit fervours. The gospel admonition we addressed to our young, unbelieving friend might be so embarrassing to him and to us; as to leave no conscious impression except one of pain. But on the next Sabbath he would listen with new ears, for he would have had the evidence that we meant all we said.

The demeanour in the pulpit must also confirm the sincerity of the preacher's affection for souls. Every tone, and look, and gesture, from the moment he enters the pulpit until he leaves it, the structure of every sen-

tence in his sermon, should reveal a soul in which levity, self-seeking and vanity are annihilated by the absorbing sense of divine things. No counterfeit will avail here, but the living faith and spirituality which are cultivated at the throne of grace, in the chambers of the afflicted and dying, and by the study of God's word.

The effect of the preacher's known character and earnestness upon his hearers is aptly illustrated by a discriminating writer, from the case of those early Methodists—Whitefield, the Wesleys, and Fletcher of Madely. He asserts that the key to the peculiar effect of their preaching was its obvious actuality. Low as was the state of religion when they burst upon the Christian world, evangelical preaching was not unknown either among the Dissenters or the Anglican clergy. But no such impression was produced by it. A few of these devout men presented the same truths with apparent sincerity and with limited effect. But the difference between the emotions of the larger mass of hearers, and those of the vast congregations swayed by these great evangelists, was like that difference which the military recruit experiences between his feelings in the mock-battle of a review, and in an actual engagement with the enemy. In the former, there are marchings and counter-marchings, there are all the pomp and circumstance of war, there are clouds of sulphurous smoke, and the ear is astounded with the thunders of artillery and the rattle of small arms. The young soldier is not a little excited; he pants with toil, he thrills with ardour, he is eager to see his party repulse their pretended adversaries. But still he is conscious that it is only a splendid farce! How different his emotions

when at length he meets an actual enemy in battle, and recognizes in the adverse lines foes who really seek his blood! Again he marches and retires; hodies of men again wheel and manœuvre before him; aids gallop with orders; the guns roar; the war-clouds enwrap him in their sultry folds as before, but he also sees plain proofs that these are no longer blank cartridges which are fired. The earth is ploughed and the forests are cut with bullets, and as he glances along the line, he sees here and there a comrade, who drops his musket and either limps away, or sinks upon the earth with a cry of anguish. This is war in truth! Now again he is excited, he pants, he is ardent for victory, he thrills with passion, but it is a terrible reality. Such was the conviction, such the awakening, of the men who fell under the spell of a Whitefield's sacred eloquence.¹ The obvious sincerity and earnestness of a living faith in the preacher made the Law, the curse, the hell, dread realities to them, which in the hand of other preachers, had only moved them as a serious fiction.

The amiable Cowper has drawn, in the second book of his *Task*, the picture of what a pastor should be in character and preaching, so venerable and lovely that I cannot forbear commending it to you as your ideal:

"There stands the messenger of truth: there stands
The legate of the skies! His theme divine,
His office sacred, his credentials clear.
By him the violated law speaks out
Its thunders; and by him, in strains as sweet
As angels use, the gospel whispers peace.
He establishes the strong, restores the weak,

¹ Isaac Taylor's "Wesley and Methodism."

Reclaims the wanderer, binds the broken heart,
 And, armed himself in panoply complete
 Of heavenly temper, furnishes with arms
 Bright as his own, and trains, by every rule
 Of holy discipline, to glorious war .
 The sacramental host of God's elect."

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"Would I describe a preacher such as Paul,
 Were he on earth, would hear, approve and own,
 Paul should himself direct me. I would trace
 His master-strokes and draw from his design.
 I would express him simple, grave, sincere ;
 In doctrine uncorrupt, in language plain,
 And plain in manners ; decent, solemn, chaste,
 And natural in gesture ; much impressed
 Himself, as conscious of his awful charge,
 And anxious mainly that the flock he feeds
 May feel it too ; affectionate in look
 And tender in address, as well becomes
 A messenger of grace to guilty men.
 Behold the picture."

Is this, my young brethren, your conception of what the pulpit orator should be? Well will it be for you and for your flocks, if this portrait, drawn by the sanctified culture and taste of a great poet, from the living models, a Newton and a Cecil, shall engage your whole approval and stimulate your aspirations!