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ETHICAL PREACHING.

IN Dr. Hitchcock's paper read before the Presbyterian Council at Philadelphia, on *The Ceremonial, The Moral, and the Emotional in Christian Life and Worship*, it is strongly asserted that a change is just now urgently needed in preaching, in the interest of what may be called generally the Ethics of Christianity. "Instead of so much systematic and apologetic theology in the pulpit, arguing out the good old doctrines in the good old way, setting forth and establishing the things which men ought to believe, there is desperate need"—it is said by the writer—"of our telling men in the plainest terms, and in minutest detail sometimes, just what they ought to be and do." Whatever may be thought as to the antithetic member of this forcible sentence, there can be no question as to the justice and the vital significance of the conclusion. No thoughtful observer of current development, whether outside of the Church or within it, can fail to see that among the forces to be utilised by evangelical Protestantism in the salvation of men in our time, ethical preaching ought to have a more prominent place.

Sometimes it has been assumed that there is a contradiction between dogmatical theology and ethics. There is rude force, as well as irreverence, in the remark of John Stuart Mill, based on this distinction: "If, as the theologians say, we must be sent to hell for putting into practice the precepts of a pure morality—for trying to lead moral lives, then to hell will we go!" Many a person in our congregations is thrown into a like dilemma, though he may have no sympathy with the profane conclusion. On the one side, he realises that he is endowed with reason and conscience, and moral power; that right and duty are tremendous realities; that there is far above him, in conjunction with them, a power in this world "working for righteousness;" and that both his felicity and his worth depend on his conforming, at whatever hazard, to these supreme ethical facts. On the other side, he sees that there is something in religion over and above these moral elements; that sin and grace are tremendous realities also, and that the Gospel, viewed as a redemptive scheme, has for him a meaning and a value quite beyond those of simple ethics. The preachers are telling him that morality is

good for nothing to save from sin,—that he must in some way renounce this ethical life, as something which has no relations to spiritual character; and that, as in antithesis to all moral culture, he must begin at once to lead a life of penitential trust in Christ. Yet Christianity appears to him to contain a system of morals grander than any existing outside of it: it reveals to his bewildered mind a beauty, an elevation, a nobility of moral character, such as no poet ever conceived before Jesus of Nazareth came into the world to illustrate and to commend it. And here the man stands, not willing in the spirit of Mill to go to hell, but in some real danger of falling into hell, from the lack of clear and just views of the point where ethics and dogmatics are blended—where morality and religion are seen, like righteousness and peace, to embrace each other.

A kindred difficulty besets many who in some sense and degree are Christian. It is not merely a raw antinomianism, with its abnormal exaltation of grace and its illicit depreciation of law, which is to be feared in this connection. Those who propose to live in a domain where the ethics of the Bible cannot reach them—in an atmosphere of grace too ethereal to be traversed by the stern messengers of law, may as well be left to the discoveries which a more thorough experiment in life will surely bring them. But there are multitudes of others in our Churches who simply need elevation in ethical tone and temper—who have never been well trained in the moralities of the Gospel, and are consequently wanting in conscientiousness, and who are too often unreliable, or even recreant, in the presence of grave moral issues. In some cases this lack is coupled with an unimpeachable orthodoxy, clear and full, and with some development of that kind of assurance which the consciousness of orthodoxy not infrequently engenders. In other cases there may be much of religious effervescence, high sensibility, flaming enthusiasm, and even of practical activity and usefulness of a certain sort. Yet, amid these desirable exhibitions, there is seen to be a pitiable want of manhood in the Christian sense—a deep moral lack, which more than offsets a sound belief, and which sometimes leads observers to regard the religious fervour exhibited as either an illusion or a fraud. In all such cases, theology and ethics, religion and morality have become too widely separate; and the consequences, not merely to the persons themselves, but to the common Christianity represented by them, are vastly disastrous.

A full inquiry into the causes or occasions of the antithesis here sketched would unduly prolong the present discussion. A few explanatory suggestions must suffice.

Historically, this separation between ethics and theology may be traced back to the Reformation. It is a lateral and abnormal outgrowth of Protestantism as that Protestantism took shape at the close of its prolonged conflict with the Papacy. The doctrine of justification by faith, as the Reformers proclaimed it, stood out in complete contrast

with all conceptions of salvation which rested in any degree on what man could do or could be. Protestantism taught the world the vital lesson that it is what Christ has done, rather than what man may do, either independently of the Church or through the Church, which is the divine ground of redemption. It affirmed that in Christ even the vilest of sinners, condemned by all the principles of abstract ethics, might hope for instant, abundant, everlasting mercy at the hands of God. It declared that the law could only condemn, and that those must realise the condemnation of the law most keenly and fearfully, who most earnestly try to obey it. It said that the believer is lifted through the Gospel above the range of that condemning law, and is set free as a bird in the purer atmosphere of grace. And it further taught that this doctrine of justification by faith, with all its corollaries and results, is as central in the Christian system as the sun is in the natural heavens; and that no man or Church can properly lay claim to the name of Christian who does not use this truth as the corner-stone of religious belief.

Was it not almost an inevitable consequence of such a presentation that some who received this doctrine heartily should come to think little of human moralities, to slight all ethical precepts and requirements, to disparage practical effort at pure living as inconsistent with the scheme of grace, and even—as in the case of some noted teachers—to affirm that good works are a positive hindrance to salvation, and that the more a man sought to live uprightly, the more his religion became an uncertainty and a snare? How much of such error existed among Protestants, both Lutheran and Calvinistic, in the century following the outbreak of the Reformation, can be known only to one who in fancy has visited the schools of the period, and has heard the theologians discourse on the vital antithesis between morality and religion—between law and grace.

Again, the papal notion of good works, with its absurd and mischievous consequences in the form of hierarchical assumption, naturally tended to strengthen this tendency. The Protestant leaders, though they did not in every case see their own mistakes, were always sharp enough to detect the miserable fallacy of endeavouring to substitute for a truly holy life the various *opera*, such as penances, prayers, contributions, imposed by a Romish Church. They saw that one genuine Christian act, animated by intelligent loyalty to moral principle, was worth a thousand Pater-nosters; and, on the other hand, that a man might be a very good churchman according to the papal standard, and yet be little else than a rascal when tried by the tests of an elevated morality. They saw that, although the papal theology professed to be based largely on ethical foundations, and even claimed superiority on that score, yet the practical notion of good works promulgated by a Church really tended to repress and dwarf an ethical life; and they justly arraigned and condemned that theology on this ground. They went

so far as not only to advance the sounder view in their discussions, but also to proclaim it from their pulpits and incorporate it in their creeds. The chapters on *Good Works* in the symbols of the period, whatever defect may attach to them, are certainly an immense improvement on at least the practice, if not the doctrine, of the Church of Rome.

Yet the Reformers carried into such discussions, and strenuously maintained, the broad antithesis between dogma and ethics with which they had started in their exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith. While, on the one hand, they taught a higher morality than that inculcated by the Papacy, they, on the other hand, declared even this to be worthless as a factor in salvation. And it is unquestionable that in this way they sometimes nullified their own teaching, and made the doctrine of good works—taking the term in the best sense—a stumbling block rather than a help in holy action. While they taught that such works spring naturally from the stock of justifying faith, and are to be regarded as indices and measures of that faith, they yet failed to emphasise adequately the duty of living rightly, and to demand fidelity to moral principle as a cardinal disposition and purpose of the regenerate soul. In a word, though they held the truth, at least in outline, they failed too often in utilising it, and in some cases remanded it practically to the background in their scheme of grace.

A third influence tending to promote this antithesis between ethics and dogma, may be seen in the antagonisms of a naturalistic philosophy, warring on ethical grounds against the demands of spiritual Christianity. The advocates of that philosophy, in the century after the Reformation, not only maintained the existence and worth of natural virtue, in the same temper in which they set forth the truths of natural, as distinct from revealed theology; they also affirmed that such virtue is not merely higher than the *opera supererogationis* of Rome, but is better even than justifying faith in the work of another. Still later we see this philosophic drift running out into pure ethics and running back quite to Plato, to the exclusion of all Christian conceptions of grace or of redemption. Of the subtle power of this speculative drift there can be no question. And it may even be true that the separation between doctrines and morals here under notice is traceable quite as much to this cause as to either the Romish priests or the Protestant theologians. In the eighteenth century, and in more recent times, this antagonism has shown itself in many ways. Even now, far too many moralists are choosing to abjure all alliance with spiritual Christianity, and even to array themselves against it on ethical grounds—as if there could be, under the government of an intelligent, just, holy God, any real conflict between the divine grace that saves, and the holy life which springs from such grace as immediately as a flower from its root!

Is it not to be feared that kindred mistakes have been made at this point by some among the representatives of orthodox opinion and belief? Is it not true that even Christian morality has sometimes

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fared badly at the hands of the theologians, its place and functions in the Christian scheme being ignored, or at least minified, under the apprehension that otherwise some damage might be done to the Gospel, as a scheme of grace? While, as Jouffroy testifies, moral philosophy has been much more widely cultivated in Britain than in the rest of Protestant Europe, yet is it not clear that even among us the moralists and the theologians have worked too much apart, as if in separate hemispheres,—realising too slightly the vital fact that the harmonious blending of religion and morality is essential alike to make religion the central, vital, controlling thing it ought to be, and to give to morality any adequate foundation and any spiritual worth? It is at least apparent that while the theologians have thus been questioning the basis and disparaging the religious worth of ethics, the advocates of moral philosophy have retaliated by questioning the value of saving doctrine, and, in the spirit of Mill, pronouncing the Christian scheme an illusive and injurious thing.

Without tracing further any specific causes tending to induce this separation between religion and morality, and to withdraw ethics relatively from the pulpit, we may turn to consider some of the harmful consequences resulting from this divorcement. Here again only a few explanatory suggestions will be made, chiefly in the form of a plea for more of sound, thorough, practical preaching of ethics in the Christian sense of that term.

That Christian theology has suffered much from this process of mutual exclusion is obvious. Of all the charges brought against theology, two are specially troublesome; those based on its dogmatic temper and on its unpractical character. The more one familiarises one's self with the theologians, whether remote or recent in time, the more is one constrained to confess that they have been an intensely dogmatical class of men. But what is dogmatism in this connection? It may be described in part by reference to the large measure of confidence in personal opinion, the assurance that one has all the logic and all the sense, and most of the honesty on his side; the forwardness and positiveness in assertion, and the magisterial air and temper in debate, which are so often exhibited in theological discussion. It is believed by many that the whole body of the ministry, and especially those who teach Christian doctrine, are subject to infirmities of this class,—infirmities which do sometimes come painfully to view in some forward, assuming, bristling theological treatise that constrains us to blush for the entire class to which the pragmatical writer belongs. If one cannot subscribe to all this, he must, at least, admit that too large a proportion of Christian theology even in our day is infected by this dogmatic temper, and that some remedy for such an infirmity is a thing to be much desired.

There is certainly room for the other charge that theology is an unpractical thing, if the popular conception of theology be admitted

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into court. It is thought by many that theology is chiefly concerned with abstract matters which nobody but a trained athlete in doctrine can understand; and that the less an ordinary man bothers his head with it, the better he will sleep, and the likelier he will be to die a happy death. Even students of theology sometimes catch an impression of this sort, and begin to fight shy of the doctrines as if these were simply dialectic subtilties, of small profit in actual life, and as dangerous to handle as a lot of rusted shells gathered from some old battlefield. There are not wanting even ministers who seem to think that the less of solid doctrine they put into their sermons, the better will it be for all concerned, and who consequently go on, year after year, coddling and pabulating their dear people with endless messes of that pulpy, watery, innutritious stuff, which sometimes lays claim to the name of practical preaching. How widely such misrepresentations of the nature, scope, and relations of Christian theology are extending among us, it is not difficult for thoughtful eyes to see.

Hardly anything would do more to cure theology of its unpleasant dogmatisms, and to make it appear to all to be the intensely practical thing it really is, than a new discussion of the living relations subsisting between it and natural, and especially Christian, ethics, and a new presentation of it from what we may call the ethical stand-point. As a matter of fact, theology is the most catholic and generous thing in the world, when ethically conceived and ethically presented. As a matter of fact, theology becomes the most vital and practical thing in the world the moment it is discerned as the divine foundation of all morality, and appreciated as the primordial basis of all godly character. Where theology becomes either unpractical or dogmatic, it descends at once from its true place as the systematic presentation of spiritual and saving truth, and degenerates into a mere strife about words, devoid alike of interest and of moral worth. But we may safely omit explanations here.

The damage done to Christian theology by this divorcement is far less serious than the damage done by it to preaching. We all know in some degree that temptations to dishonesty, to impurity, to low and sneaking policies, to unmanliness in living, and indeed to every species of departure from the straight, clear, beautiful standard of character set forth in the Bible, are fearfully abundant in our time; and that multitudes of people are, day after day, carried off their feet by these devastating currents of iniquity. Even among Christians, whose orthodoxy is as clean and stiff as the ruff of an old ecclesiastic, we often discover a woeful lack of that good old thing which we call conscience; and as for the mass of impenitent hearers, there seems to be nothing else which they need so much as the restoration of conscience as a dominating force in their personal life. So long as this ethical basis is so largely wanting in both directions—so long as the law of God is not seen and felt in the sovereignty of its high behests by both saint and sinner, what

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can we expect but comparative failure in the effort to impress both parties with the value of what belongs more distinctively to the Gospel, viewed as a scheme of regenerative grace! And must we not confess that no small part of this ethical deficiency is due directly to the lack of sound, earnest, continuous discussion of the well-known principles of Christian morality in our pulpits? Have not the ministers too often been fumbling, spectacles on nose, over the driest possible phases of mere dogma, or twittering like very young lovers over the mere sentiments of Christianity, while the people have gone on with unrestricted feet, heedless of such inconsequent discourse, trampling into the dust in their mad passion alike the law of conscience and the law of God?

It cannot well be doubted that the pulpit has itself been greatly weakened, while its efficiency as a social force has thus been reduced by this relative withdrawal of ethical discussion. I sometimes long for a return of that old, solid, tremendous style of preaching to the conscience, of which we have so admirable an illustration in Jonathan Edwards and his immediate successors in New England. I am inclined to think that the treatise of Edwards on the *Religious Affections*, and that of Bellamy entitled *True Religion Delineated*, are, in fact, the best essays on ethics, in the Christian sense, ever published on this Western continent. And undoubtedly there was a certain grandeur, solemnity, and persuasive impressiveness, in the preaching of these men, which has rarely if ever been surpassed.

They proclaimed the Law of God, and with what almost terrific force! They stood up for the government of God, and demanded for it the instant and perfect loyalty of every man, so that their hearers fairly trembled and fainted before them. They wrought upon the conscience till it became sensitive to the slightest touch of obligation—till it rose up in the breast of every sinner, accusing and condemning as an angel sent for judgment. Duty was their clarion cry; not merely the duty of repentance and belief, but equally the duty of verifying repentance, certifying belief, by a holy life; not duty in the low sense of natural morality, but rather in the high, keen, spiritual sense enjoined by a Christianity which included the entire nature, both ethical and religious. Oh, how these men, for two or three generations beyond the time of Edwards, moved and swayed the heart of New England; shaping vitally the personal, domestic, social, and civil life of the people, stamping their unique impress ineffaceably on the popular thought and impulse; and diffusing throughout society a moral tone and force, a spiritual vigour and nobility, which it would take centuries of degeneracy to obliterate!

Nothing would do more in our day to restore the pulpit to its true place of power, or to bring the people back to clean and square living according to the Gospel, than a reproduction of some such style of preaching. If the ministry would but begin again to thunder, as God thundered at Sinai,—if they would once more proclaim the law, and declare the presence and supremacy of a divine government in the

world, bringing their hearers into the dust before that sublime and awful fact, much of the current lamentation respecting the impotency of the pulpit would be ended. Let the conscience be reached, probed, vitalised, until it becomes, if need be, a terror worse than death to every bold transgressor ; let duty, duty, be proclaimed once more by those who preach, until the echoing cry should reverberate through the whole heaven of the popular thought ! There might not be so many conversions for a while, but there would be more in the end. There might not be so much profession in the land, but there would be more religion : and that not according to the definition of James merely, but in the Pauline and the Johannean senses also. And though at first ministers might be a little less popular, and the pulpit should assume a more Sinaitic air, there would certainly be a vast accession both of power and of usefulness in the end.

A remark or two may be suffered in conclusion with respect to the influence of such ethical discourse upon the preachers themselves. It cannot be questioned that the tendency of the divorcement between ethics and dogmatics here considered, is toward degeneracy in ministerial character. If doctrinal soundness be regarded as the main qualification, and the ability to set forth the doctrines ably as the chief excellence, and the training of the hearers in orthodoxy as the supreme function, it will not be long before the minister will drift into comparative indifference to what belongs more immediately to personal, as distinct from official character. It will not be strange if he substitutes these qualities for sound and pure manhood ; and so affords us the pitiful spectacle of an official, trained with exactitude for the externalities of his position, but blurred and stained with moral imperfections which sadly diminish, if they do not wholly cancel, his proclamations of truth. Too many ministers, it must be confessed, fall short of that high and square honesty in financial and in other relations, which the New Testament so forcibly enjoins on every believer : too many are wanting in that perfect truthfulness which is in a genuinely Christian character what the clear sparkle is in the diamond : too many are selfish men, looking out primarily for their own interests, and destroying the largest part of their natural influence for good by their obvious disposition to use even the Word and the Church of God for their own comfort or advantage : too many are jealous, envious, ambitious men, unwilling to see their brethren prosper beyond themselves, and ready in their selfishness to tear down any reputation which stands higher or shines out more widely than their own.

Guarding against false or exaggerated impressions here, shall we not confess that there is great need of a higher manliness, of a loftier manhood, in the ministry of our time, as one prime essential to increased efficiency and fruitfulness ? And shall we not also agree in the judgment that an earnest effort to introduce Christian ethics more prominently into the pulpit would exhibit its first fruits in the elevation

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ethically of those by whom the effort was honestly made? No sincere preacher can attempt to arouse and educate the conscience of his hearers without arousing and educating his own; no sincere preacher can set forth the true relations between religion and morality, and enforce in the Scriptural manner the great law of duty as God Himself has stated it, without finding his own moral nature suffused and exalted by what he is inculcating upon others. Jonathan Edwards was himself one of the manliest of men; great as he was in knowledge and insight, he was greater still in character; and some part at least of what Jonathan Edwards was, must be traced back to the reflex influence of what he so ably and so faithfully taught. This reflexive result may always be anticipated; and the restoration of strong and thorough ethical preaching would register itself probably first of all and most deeply in those to whom the task and the privilege of such restoration were given.

May God make the rising ministry of this eventful age preachers of righteousness as well as preachers of grace;—preachers who, while they most faithfully teach men what they ought to believe, will with equal fidelity teach them what they ought to be and do.

E. D. MORRIS.

THE SHADOW OF THE PURITAN WAR IN MILTON.

I. THE EARLY POEMS.

A FEW years since, when the phonograph first came to this country, a London journal threw out the prediction that, if the tinfoil which was used for retaining the sounds could be so perfected, that instead of retaining them for three months, as at that time, it could hold them for two or three hundred years, the people of the twenty-first or twenty-second century might be able to recall speeches delivered in this nineteenth; and not only the speeches, but the very variations of voice in the speakers, and the expressions of approval or disapproval in the audience.

In the writings of John Milton, without the help of such an instrument, we, who are living more than two hundred years after the Puritan war, have preserved to us the hopes, the fears, the warnings, the cries of victory and defeat, and the faith that failed not even in dark days, of the people who fought in that war. And we have these so preserved, that we can recall the very accents of joy or anger, the very tones of the passionate utterances, which thrilled and swelled in the life of England during the whole progress of that war.