

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE CHURCHMAN

DECEMBER, 1881.

ART. I.—MINISTERIAL PROGRESS.

"That, by daily reading and weighing of the Scriptures, ye may wax riper and stronger in your ministry."—*Service for the Ordination of Priests.*

WE hear much in the present day of ministerial responsibility, ministerial efficiency (or non-efficiency), ministerial success, and the like. Important subjects, all. We believe the Church of God in these lands to be awake, and her officers share in the general awakening. The old race of idle, ignorant, incapable parsons has well nigh died out; specimens may be found here and there (we dare say the bishops could name a few), but they do not force themselves into notice; they probably feel that they are out of harmony with the age, that they ought almost to apologize for existing at all; they are very sorry, but it is too late for them to mend. The younger clergy, and very many we hope who are no longer young, are alive to the responsibilities of the sacred office: they may not always be clear in their doctrine, they may hover at times too wistfully round the fringe of fashionable life; but their conduct is morally blameless, and, in the main, they desire to discharge, according to their lights, the duties of their high calling. Hence the interest taken at rural-decanal and clerical meetings, Church Congresses, and other gatherings, in subjects bearing upon the spiritual life, and the means of promoting ministerial efficiency and success: hence the higher tone which, largely through the teaching and influence of the clergy, prevails throughout the land.

We cannot be too thankful for these and other "tokens for good." The prophets of evil may tell us that the Church of England is moribund, but we do not believe them: we have heard the cry of "the Church in danger" too often to be much frightened at it; and as long as we can trace on all sides the quickening

pulses of spiritual life, and see clergy and laity combining together, as they have never done before, to stem the tide of evil and spread the message of salvation, we should be worse than cowards if we despaired of the future of our Church, or proved, as Churchmen, unfaithful to our trust.

But there is one aspect of ministerial responsibility which has not, we venture to think, received the attention which it deserves. Progress is recognized as an essential law of the spiritual life. Is it not equally a law of the ministerial life? Is a ministry true and effective if it be not progressive? Can we continually urge upon our people "that they go forward," if we do not go forward ourselves? We have no desire to dogmatize; but feeling deeply the importance of ministerial progress, we offer the following remarks upon it:—

I. First, we may probably take it for granted that some of our people will go forward in the Christian life, whether we do so or not. Inkermann was pre-eminently a soldiers' battle: the suddenness of the attack, the thickness of the atmosphere, the nature of the ground, combined to throw the soldiers upon their own resources; they fought the battle very much after their own fashion and won it. But according to the laws of war the soldier needs generalship and leading; and if in the English army the former sometimes fails him, the latter never. The English soldier is always grandly led.

We ministers of the Gospel are bound to lead our people onwards: but if we fail to do so they will advance by themselves. Our people are not so wholly dependent upon us as we may sometimes imagine. The educated have a large and instructive literature at their command: the uneducated have their Bibles at least; and the fervent oratory of the meeting-house is commonly within their reach. If the Christian is in earnest he will find the means of going forward, whether his pastor lead him in that direction or not. The complaint is sometimes made that the sheep wander; may it not be because they are not fed? They do not find at home the teaching which their souls thirst for, and they seek it elsewhere. The teaching which satisfied the formalist will not satisfy one who has tasted of the grace of God; and the elementary truths which first brought life and light to the soul will hardly afford sufficient nourishment to one who is longing to be made acquainted with "the whole counsel of God."

Some, then, at least of our people, and they the very pick of the flock, will advance in the spiritual life, even though we give them little or no assistance. We may help them forward if we will—they have a right to look for such help at our hands: but if we fail, the channels of grace are not dried up; God will assuredly complete "the work of his own hands."

II. But in what does ministerial progress consist? We believe that the basis of progress must be laid in the pastor's own soul. We assume conversion to have taken place, genuine whole-hearted consecration of heart and life to God. We assume the realization of a present salvation and the conscious enjoyment of God's forgiving love in Christ. We assume, in a word, that the foundations of personal religion have been well and securely laid in him. But if so, the spiritual life needs to be continually deepened and strengthened; the character requires to be built up; and if, as time passes, early convictions lose somewhat of their freshness, they should gain in force and solidity as the apprehension of divine truth becomes more definite and enlarged. "Take heed unto thyself;" "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus;" "Follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness"—are amongst the most prominent of St. Paul's counsels to Timothy; and they all point to the deepening of personal piety, and to the cultivation of the life of God in the pastor's own soul.

III. We understand, however, by ministerial progress, not so much that which the pastor shares with other Christians, as that which he should aim at as the Minister of Christ, and more especially in his public teaching.

Revelation itself has been progressive in its character, and the apprehension of revelation has in like manner been progressive. The Apostles themselves were "guided" (led as a traveller along an unknown way) by the Holy Spirit "into all the truth" (John xvi. 13), and it was only by slow degrees that they apprehended the full counsel of God. Nor, we conceive, does a different law prevail now. True we have before us in Scripture the full-orbed revelation of God, but it does not follow that we take in at a glance either its several parts or its harmonious proportions. Grant that there is great variety of doctrine: can each one claim to have made each doctrine his own? Grant that divine truth has been revealed in different proportions: are we sure that we hold each truth in the proportion assigned to it in Scripture? Grant that amidst much diversity there is perfect harmony: have we seized with a firm grasp the key to that harmony, and learned to walk securely through the labyrinth of truth? It requires only to ask such questions as these to convince us that we have much to learn, and that it is only as we advance into fuller and clearer light that we may hope to teach more completely "the counsel of God."

IV. It may be useful to illustrate these general statements by a few examples.

We are persuaded that no Christian minister can ever claim to have arrived at an absolutely perfect method of setting forth the Gospel of Christ and the terms of a sinner's

acceptance with God. We would lay full stress upon the importance of preaching the Law; we believe that as a rule the entrance of the Law is the true preparation for the acceptance of the Gospel: but it is in the preaching of the Gospel that the powers of the minister will be especially called forth. The author of "The Recreations of a Country Parson" has a chapter in one of his works "On the art of putting things;" and in nothing perhaps is this art so greatly needed as in presenting the terms of salvation to our hearers. Consider the variety of minds with which we have to deal—the ignorance, the prejudice, the error which exists amongst them; the natural indisposition of the human heart to receive the message of grace; and the conscious imperfection of the instrument by which that message is conveyed,—and then say whether it is as easy a thing to preach the Gospel as some seem to imagine. We are persuaded—nay, we are more and more persuaded as years roll on—that, whether in preaching to the educated or the uneducated, we need the utmost wisdom and skill in stating the terms of a sinner's acceptance with God, and in expounding the fulness, the freeness, and the all-sufficiency of the Gospel of Christ.

But where, it may be asked, is there room for progress in this department of our work? We answer, everywhere: in our delineation of sin, its nature and results; in our exposition of the eternal love of the Father, the redeeming work of the Son, and the quickening power of the Holy Spirit; in our enforcement of a present salvation, of the means by which the sinner obtains an interest in that salvation, and of the answers by which the objections and difficulties of the unbelieving heart are to be met. This, it may be said, is very old ground. Be it so: it does not follow that the most enlightened may not learn to see fundamental truth more clearly, and thus to make it more intelligible to his hearers. Take the one point of a free, present salvation. Do all who in the main preach the truth of God quite understand what that means? Do they proclaim it fully and fearlessly? Do they not sometimes so hedge it round with safeguards and conditions as virtually to deprive it of its freeness, and make it no present salvation at all? The human mind clings very tenaciously to the principles of legalism; the shadow of Mount Sinai is continually thrusting itself across the pathway of the Gospel,—and the very best men need to be re-established from time to time in the doctrines of grace.¹

V. But passing from those fundamental doctrines, in our apprehension of which we believe progress to be possible, there

¹ See "Brief Thoughts on the Gospel" (Nisbet's), by an old writer: a short but admirable treatise on the terms of a sinner's acceptance with God.

is obviously a very wide range of truth throughout which progressive enlightenment is to be desired. Take, for example, the doctrine of the Church of Christ, its composition, its privileges, its security, and its end: study carefully such passages as John xvii.; Romans v. and viii.; Ephesians i., ii., and iii.; consider the sober but profound statements of the seventeenth Article of the Church of England; and then ask whether our teaching upon these points is always a faithful transcript of Holy Scripture, or whether there is not room for progress in this department of our work.

Prophecy again, fulfilled and unfulfilled, opens to us a wide field of investigation. Have we ever honestly entered upon it? It is strange to observe with what perfect contentment clergymen will announce that they have never studied prophecy; and almost take credit to themselves for having avoided the subject altogether. But can any portion of the Word of God be systematically neglected with impunity? Can we teach others the whole counsel of God, if we refuse to make ourselves acquainted with a very large portion of that counsel? The difficulty of a subject is no valid excuse for its neglect: God hath spoken, and it is for His ministers to try at least to understand His voice. These are only specimens of subjects in the apprehension and consequent unfolding of which ministerial progress may well be made.

VI. Once more, granting the possession of a sound and comprehensive knowledge of revealed truth, improvement is surely always possible in the method of exhibiting it. We do not now refer to the art of preaching, which is beside our present subject, but rather to the order, the proportions, and the relation to each other of the truths we preach. We assume that Christ and his salvation form the substance of all our teaching: we shall never travel far from that great centre: but whilst we ever keep within sight of the Cross, we have a very wide field of truth open to us, and we are bound to occupy it.

Several questions here suggest themselves to us for consideration. Is our teaching as a whole sufficiently systematic? Do we in the course of (say) a year present to our people a well-considered, well-proportioned body of sacred truth? Are there no serious gaps in our teaching, no undue prominence given to certain favourite truths, to the exclusion of others of equal and perhaps greater importance? Are we scripturally fearless in combining doctrine with practice, and practice with doctrine? do we aim at making our preaching practical? and are we careful to show that high doctrine demands a high and—if we may use the expression—a very minute morality?

Once more, are we skilful in adapting our teaching to the needs and circumstances of our hearers; not, indeed, assuming

that simple truth is not good for the learned, or profound truth beyond the reach of the unlearned; but remembering that a cultivated mind will be repelled by the slightest approach to vulgarity, and that the vocabulary of the uneducated is very limited indeed.

A careful scrutiny will probably reveal many defects in the modes and methods adopted by the most conscientious. The subject is a wide one. We have touched but a fragment of it. We have said, perhaps, enough to establish the truth of our thesis, and to show the value of a progressive ministry.

VII. It only remains to observe that ministerial progress very largely depends upon prayerful, continuous, systematic study of the whole body of revealed truth. It is our function not to reveal, but to expound; the substance of all our teaching is contained within the four corners of the inspired volume: we may travel far and wide for illustration and confirmation of the truth, but the Bible is our one textbook, and it is by "daily reading and weighing of the Scriptures" that we may hope to "wax riper and stronger in our ministry."

Progress is the watchword of the day: its footprints may be seen in every department of human knowledge: its traces are happily not wanting in the study and interpretation of the Word of God. Textual criticism has secured to us an almost perfect text;¹ whilst the labours of our Revisers have given a marvellous impulse to the study of the New Testament. Commentaries abound: and amid much that is so truly valuable, our difficulty lies chiefly in selection. May we venture to suggest that one secret of progress consists in mastering thoroughly whatever we attempt to learn? One Gospel carefully and exhaustively studied, shall yield more lasting fruit to ourselves and to our hearers than the cursory examination of many books. With Professor Westcott's and Mons. Godet's commentaries on St. John's Gospel in our hands, for example, supplemented by the careful compilation of Bishop Ryle, and the condensed exposition of Mr. Plummer, it is our own fault if we do not arrive at an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of that sublime work. It was the favourite motto of a great modern writer, that, "whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well," a principle most truly applicable to the study of the Word of God. It is by such study that we wax riper and stronger in our ministry, that we are enabled to stand firm

¹ "If comparative trivialities . . . are set aside, the words, in our opinion, still subject to doubt can hardly amount to more than a thousandth part of the whole New Testament. . . . In the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests, the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone among ancient prose writings."—WESTCOTT'S & HORT'S *New Testament*, p. 561.

ourselves, and to help others to stand firm also; it is by such study that we throw freshness and power into our teaching, the freshness which springs from the acquisition of knowledge, and the power which is derived from a clear apprehension and a vigorous grasp of truth.

E. BAYLEY.

ART. II.—THE CITY CHURCHES.

AMONG the many anomalies which strike the eye of the intelligent foreigner, who makes the manners and customs of English life his study, not the least is our national want of adaptability to a change of circumstances. Having once got into a groove, it seems as if we cannot get out of it. An "institution" remains so, and is regarded almost with veneration, long after the circumstances which called it into existence, and which indeed alone rendered it needful, have passed away. We seem to be somewhat deficient in the faculty which enables us to take note of the march of time; and we cling to the past not merely as a matter of sentiment and of reflection, but to an extent which materially cripples the energies of the present. The result is serious enough when it interferes with the welfare of large bodies of our fellow countrymen, whose interests are systematically sacrificed, because we fail to recognize accomplished facts, and prefer the ostrich-like expedient of wilful blindness, when we are desirous of shutting out an unpleasant object. No one, indeed, will accuse the present age of overmuch reverence for the opinions and habits of thought which characterized those periods which preceded it. Yet, in spite of a general tendency to change, if only for the sake of change, we constantly come across instances of obstinate tenacity, in quarters in which we should least have expected to find them. "Vested interests," of course, have much to do with the problem. But in this latter half of the nineteenth century, vested interests alone could not stay the hand of the reformer, if the whole case were thoroughly realized. It is this want, or rather slowness of perception, which forms part of our national character, and against which we require to be, from time to time, put upon our guard.

The difficulty which is experienced in dealing with the question of City churches is precisely a case in point. Few, but those to whom the subject has come home are aware of the utter waste of power involved in the existing state of things. Yet the abuse, for such it really is, has gone on in all its glaring proportions during the whole lifetime of the present generation.