

# 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)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# The Evangelical Quarterly

OCTOBER 15th, 1944

## SOME ASPECTS OF WAR-TIME PREACHING

IN discussing the subject of war-time preaching the kind of questions I would bring into sight are such as these: What difference has a time of war made with regard to the felt needs of our people? What has come into the forefront of their minds as they wait on our ministry? What stirrings in the depths, perhaps scarcely articulate, have taken place? What therefore is our opportunity and perhaps temptation? How far can we rightly take the current as it flows for the service of the kingdom, and how far should we feel constrained to force attention to aspects of the faith that may be unwelcome?

All this involves some patient effort to realise at some depth the difference that the war has made, the strains and tensions it has created, above all the questions directed Godward which it is our calling to answer out of His Word.

I am not forgetting that our hope of knowing what is going forward in the minds and hearts of those we seek to serve depends primarily on realising what has happened to ourselves, the aspects of truth that have become sharp and clear as well as, it may be, a deepening range of uncertainty and bafflement in certain regions. In some ways we are probably closer to our people than ever before, feeling the same pressures, awakening to the same approaches of God. Our special task is to get these movements of the spirit as clear as we can and find the words that will be recognised as true.

### I

Our supreme task is to maintain our people's faith in God, and it is well that we should acknowledge with gratitude the strength and steadiness of the faith that offers its response to our effort. It could readily seem that the shock and cataclysm of war might raise for men and women the fundamental question and provide us with the problem of virtual atheism. We have

so often been invited to note the great fringe of feeble believers, whose hold on faith has seemed so precarious and whose apparent ignorance of and indifference to Bible religion seemed to make them easy victims of every fierce challenge of circumstance. But it has been, I think, a remarkable and significant fact that the terrible challenge of War has not let loose the denials we might have expected. It inclines me to think that we have perhaps failed less completely with many whom we should have hesitated to claim as worthy sharers in the faith than was supposed. Or should we say that God has had a surer footing in their lives than we knew? I remember Denney saying during the last war that he had been reading some letters by some College girls in which they said that their faith had gone by the board since the war began and who did not propose to go further until what was baffling and mysterious in the tragic scene was made clear to them. His comment was that it would be a melancholy addition to the horrors of war if it yielded a crop of juvenile sceptics who, never having been conscious of any great tension in the world before, gave up the battle of life the moment *this* awful tension came home to them. If they only knew it, he added, they ought to be grateful to God that even the tremendous shock of war was revealing to them the nature and necessity of faith.

For myself, I have come upon remarkably little of the attitude he referred to then. Rather I could believe that there has been a widespread recognition that it is the nature of faith to be tried and to withstand trial; that when it is justified it is in the ordeal of battle, not in academic disputation. What, I think, has been a source of strength to men's faith, enabling them to stand up to the assault of war, has been a readiness to take seriously the Bible message that speaks of the judgment of God. This conception, which can easily fall into the background in quieter times, has found a new access to men's minds as they are solemnised by this experience of the consequences that flow from the evil will of man. I have often been struck during these last few years in talking to people, even unlikely people, to find so clear a recognition that the world was ripe for this disaster and that one key at least to its mystery and pain could be found in the necessary truth that God is not mocked. There is a fruitful field here, for much follows. It puts a strong guard on the soul to prevent that moral com-

placency which is a persistent danger to those who feel compelled to recognise and maintain a deep-going difference between the nations that are contending. When we think how manifold are the pressures brought to bear on men's minds to strengthen their sense of a difference in respect to the highest human values which divides them from their enemies—a difference the reality of which could alone justify the carnage—it is indeed remarkable that a conception of the character of God which involves the impression that in a still profounder sense there is no difference should find ready access to their minds and consciences. It may be that it is here we may find one reason at least for the visible presence of some power in men's life controlling, if it cannot wholly overcome, the barren spirit of sheer hatred and the lust for vengeance.

I remember an old man saying to me not long ago that for the first time he had come to know the *comfort* of thinking that God's judgments were abroad. "Comfort?" I said. "Yes: comfort. I had an awful fear that all was out of hand and that there was no meaning in life after all. It all seemed so utterly senseless. But now I see that God is in it and though I am sometimes sorely afraid, better fear His judgment than just something that has happened."

Surely there is something there we can lay hold of and carry further. There is a response awaiting us if only we ourselves realised the tragic necessity, rooted in the nature of God, whereby evil is repelled at such a cost, and if we catch even a glimpse of a holy Will for which at this moment no other alternative offers a better hope for the world.

## II

Once again, I find that one of the most fundamental as well as one of the most difficult doctrines of the Faith is apt to find a ready response in the minds of our people; that of Providence. Just as courage in a sense underlies and makes possible every Christian virtue, so a belief in the divine power to overrule all things for His good purpose underlies all effectual faith in God. The deep-going instinct, even among those for whom prayer is very occasional and seldom a comforting experience, to bring petitions and intercessions to God brings into consciousness this question of the range and depth of a

Providential care and power. Probably the most earnest intellectual problems facing us from the pews centre here. May I say in passing that I have not myself been so impressed by the presence of sharply defined *problems* in the minds of Christian people as many occasional writers to-day would suggest. I am tempted to think that many of these so-called urgent problems which appear on the face of it to be the natural reaction to war are in large part the product of a comparatively small number of an intellectual type who have already developed a critical capacity and do their thinking along that way. It may be that we are apt to assume, and so in a measure to create, problems of a kind which have not seriously disturbed our hearers, and this not because they are too dull or ill-equipped to realise them but because they are seeing their way more clearly in these matters than we give them credit for. I am disposed to think that we may have spent a good deal of time to little profit by feeling constrained to provide a complete apologetic for maintaining the Christian faith in war-time.

But I do think that a real need to-day is for a clarification of the Christian view of Providence whereby insights can be opened up into the mystery of the divine governance of events. People are well aware that faith is worthless unless it be true that God can make even the wrath of men to praise Him, and that prayers of intercession are vain unless the God of Whom Jesus says that He is present where a sparrow falls to the ground, is present where the shell bursts and in some other sense than as a tragically affected spectator of what is happening under His eyes.

There is the standing problem of human life beset by the mysterious incidence of events and it is surely heightened and deepened by living continuously in the region of anxiety and deep concern.

Help here can be sought so earnestly, with so much at stake, that the preacher is in danger of pretending to solutions that would go beyond faith and which may do a grave disservice to men and women in the outcome. It seems to me that there are two things at least which may be done. The first may seem negative and even depressing but it should not be. It is to bring out the necessity, but also the comfort of the "agnosticism" which in the Bible appears as an aspect of the fullest faith. The Book of Job is only one poignant and profound example of a certain noble scorn of the denial of faith on

the ground that it is a second best to sight. The same scorn informs the closest intimacies with the mind of God in the N.T.

Here and there we catch the faint outline of what may be a hint of the divine purpose in the management of events, and in our own experience the lines can become a good deal clearer although within the severest limits even there. But there is a point beyond which we move at our peril and to the danger of our people's faith, and to that point we are sorely tempted to go. Even apart from the temptation to offer a premature consolation or assurance we are prone always to seek a neat and morally palatable interpretation of events where the more mature saints are standing with bowed heads and hands on their mouths, but at a far remove from dull resignation or despair. Beyond that we can go only as we make assurance of the divine governance an inference from redemption as Paul so consistently does; thus setting the question and the questioner in their only secure context where the final mystery of life loses its blackness and becomes an essential part of the fullest revelation of the outstretched Hand, mighty to deliver.

### III

Then there is the question of the life beyond death. In spite of what might seem to be the natural expectation I am not able to confess to receiving any marked encouragement from the pew to engage myself with this theme.

I may be reminded of the increase of interest in what various types of spiritualistic investigation offer the anxious enquirer and of the not inconsiderable number of our Church people who frequent these places. I am told that recently the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, was crowded to hear what some of their leaders had to say. This kind of interest is often commended to our notice, usually with the word "wistful" attached, to invite us to find here a religious longing which points to the Christian message as the answer which will satisfy.

I am not sure that there is any great opportunity opened up in this region. So far as my very limited experience goes there is not *much* hope along this line, because I do not detect the kind of inward pressure, the kind of question which is the prerequisite to the Gospel answer. The whole business seems to me to belong rather to the region of human curiosity which

is one of the motives of science than to the cry out of the depths which is the authentic sign that the God witnessed to in the Bible is in the field. It is nearer therefore to a kind of escapism than to a search for the truth of God, and the satisfactions that are received from it, far from corroborating faith or leading towards faith seem to me to indicate a profound disinclination from the Gospel message.

But to return to what in the circumstances—if I am right in thinking that there has been little fresh interest in what gave so much of its height and depth to the life of the early Church—must seem a strange lack of urgent interest: I wonder if it is due to a longish period during which there has been very little teaching on a theme so profoundly and characteristically Christian, so capable of manifold insights into the heart of the faith. Have we been content for the most part with a rather monotonous—not to say perfunctory—reference to round off a closing peroration?

It may be that a serious charge can be brought against us in this matter. If our people's faith here consists in a vaguely consoling confidence that all is well, and will be so with themselves when the hour comes, rather than the triumphant but soul-searching conviction that informs the N.T. hope, then it may be that we have partly lost the key to the Bible witness in its emphasis on Resurrection power, rather than in the immortality of the soul. "He was dead and is alive again", that picture that was so deeply etched into the mind of the father in the parable, the picture of resurrection from the dead, strikes the note which sounds through the N.T. and opens up all the amazement, the newness, the promise in the creative action of God, which must put out of court so many uninspiring thoughts that run along the line of mere continuance in somewhat happier circumstances.

#### IV

Again: What has been the influence of war-time on the place of a Cross in the thought and life of our people? Is it easier for us, or rather is there a constraint laid on us by the expectation of our people, to seek to take fresh soundings where the great affirmations of the N.T. are made concerning it?

If I may return for a moment to something Denney said to his students at Trinity College, Glasgow, during the last

war—he asked then what the Church had to learn from the field of battle and he said this:

“The one grand lesson of the war is the reality and the worth of sacrifice. Men are dying daily, dying for us. We are living because they die: we are redeemed by their precious blood. This is the language in which the Bible speaks of Christ. He died for us. We were not bought for nothing: we were bought with a price. This is the very heart of the N.T. It is a revelation not only of a reconciling God but of the cost of reconciliation . . .

“I do not think it is an injustice to the Church if I say that there has been in the last generation a certain shyness in its attitude to this central truth. Preachers have chosen texts not quite out of proportion to their abilities, texts in which their psychological insight, their eloquence, might have a fair field—rather than texts which first struck them dumb. They have hovered over the pages of their Bibles or skimmed the edges of them instead of being drawn down into their deep places. I believe the simplest facts of the war will lead the Church back to the simple fact of the Cross—Christ died for us. It would be, and I believe it will be one of the blessings of the war to give the sacrifice of Jesus its place again in Christian preaching and in the thoughts of Christian people. And when I say its place I include its power. It cannot be denied that there has been such a thing as the preaching and professing of Christianity which made an illegitimate divorce between the two. Christ died for us—so the argument seemed to run—and therefore we are exempt from the consequences of sin which He bore in our stead. Far be it from me to question that the sacrifice of Jesus annuls and transmutes much in our sinful lives but a merely negative way of putting it is not in harmony with Scripture. The great sacrifice only redeems those whom it inspires. If He laid down His life for us we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. So it is said by the writer who says the last word about almost everything Christian. This truth also, I believe, will be reinforced by the war.”

I have allowed the quotation to run on (as Denney's men are rather prone to do, remembering the tones of his voice when, as here, he was deeply moved). But it does serve to raise the question as to how far he was right in his prophecy and how far his expectation stands to-day?

Has that aspect of the sacrifice of Christ come more clearly into sight? Is its aim seen to be not to exempt but to inspire: not only to be a great deliverance but also a high calling? Is it being abundantly recognised that the rudest savage who is knocked on the head fighting the battle of his clan is nearer the Kingdom of God than the most refined and cultivated person who lives on sacrifice and makes none?

I confess that I do not know to what extent the Cross has become more central in the faith of our people and in the Preaching of the Word. There are other aspects of it than that which Denney hoped and believed would be freshly realised, aspects which stand over against us with searching and painful questions reminding us daily that the blood on our hands cannot



be simply equated with the blood on His, and forcing us to endure the tension which our choice has involved for us, reminding us continually that it is as guilty sinners that we seek to offer Him our service in this struggle. So far as my own impression goes it is the Cross above all, and its measureless power to create, and ever more create, a sense of sin, that offers the chief barrier both to our people's pride and the fierce resentments that could turn the strife into something wholly evil. If we still tend to evade it and seek other themes more commensurate with our powers so much the worse for us and for them.

## V

I should like now to turn to an aspect of war-time preaching regarding which there has been a kind of cleavage between pulpit and pew inasmuch as the preacher is often conscious of a problem, not yet resolved in his own mind, regarding which the great majority of his hearers have little trouble. It is the question of the hope given by our Faith concerning the redemption of this world's life.

Principal Cairns has examined closely the missionary hymns in which the Church has declared its longings and its heart's confidence in the coming of the Day of Christ, and shown that the overwhelming witness they bear is that Christ will yet triumph over the sin of the world and establish with fulness the Kingdom of peace and righteousness.

I do not think there is much doubt as to how these hymns are interpreted by our people. There are no limits yet in their minds. A day is coming before the end when evil and all its bitter fruit shall be destroyed and the Paradise of God shall be restored.

Nothing like the same confidence is represented in the pulpit. Many of the most vigorous schools of theology have declared themselves unambiguously against such a hope as not being Biblical at all. Although they would not perhaps feel it necessary to re-write the hymns, since they deem them passive of a more completely eschatological interpretation, they cannot be unaware of the meaning so persistently attached to them by our congregations, a meaning that has bound up with it much of the joy of the Christian life. I cannot help thinking that those hymns with their promise of a full, redeemed earth are

going to have a still more secure place in the Church's worship. Since the startled earth has drunk so deeply once again of the blood of men, and the great values that have always maintained themselves hard have once more been deemed worthy of paying a great price to win, any view of this world which finds in it only the scene of our probation will find, I imagine, something resistant, even perhaps indignant in the hearts of our people.

As a final hope, the picture of an ever deepening conflict as principalities and powers awake to the increasing challenge of the Kingdom's presence—and then, somehow the end comes and history is over—is not one in which the heart can rest. It is one thing to contend, even violently, with the world's conception of progress by the power of our human wit; it is another to deem no honour too great to bestow on a world where the Son of God has done His mighty work. I think the common instinct has a better right to speak here than those who in the last resort would put in jeopardy the springs of motive that sustain men in their faith that somehow their service in the world will be lifted up into the Kingdom given by God.

## VI

And this one further aspect of our preaching: I am quite sure that there are many ministers who have been moved and quickened by the Church's manifest interest in the call to concern itself much more closely than heretofore with social, political and economic questions. How is the demand to find practical expression? In particular what is to be the preacher's share in it? Hitherto the full resources of the Christian faith as it bears on questions of justice, equity, and human brotherhood have not been brought to bear and it is now discerned that the will of God for the Church to-day requires a new approach. Many of us, deeply sympathetic as we are, are wondering what it is going to involve for us, how it is going to affect the content of our message.

It is easy to see how ineffectual the pulpit has been in this whole region. Some of us, I imagine, blush to remember how many sweeping generalities have been poured on our people's heads while we hoped we were laying down those principles which would, if they were held, transform the whole desperate situation. For not wholly ignoble reasons we kept at a distance

from concrete realities and comforted ourselves with that so alluring half-truth that if men's hearts were changed the rest could be safely left to their Christian insight. Some of us may even have said that systems were of relative unimportance if only good men were running them.

And now we are urged to go farther. We hear of "middle maxims" which will take us half-way from the region of general principles to where the actual struggle goes forward. These maxims, we are encouraged to believe, can be found if we come more closely to grips with the clear ethical implications of the Gospel.

I am almost sure that there is something here if only we could get hold of it. I think our people are prepared for something more direct, with a closer bearing on the realities of the situation. If we are frank enough and distinguish between the kind of authority with which we set forth the central message which is our calling and the more tentative efforts to bring into sight the ways in which the Gospel ought to work itself out in men's lives, I think they will be patient with us and with their fuller practical knowledge help us to see more clearly.

Two things it certainly will demand of us: (1) A much fuller knowledge of what men and women who are in the heart of the business are involved in. Many of us are very hazy about the most elementary facts in this region and could easily make disastrous mistakes. But without professing to become expert we can reach a measure of knowledge that would fit us to see where the line of justice and brotherhood runs. (2) And we can make ever fresh discoveries, under a sense of pressure from the side of God, in the rich resources of ethics. On the whole the vein that has been explored and that formerly satisfied us has been far too slender, far too narrowly concerned with personal behaviour and a limited range of relationships.

I must confess that I tremble a little as I realise some of the difficulties that will confront us, but who can doubt that we are under divine call to make this venture, or that there is reason for hope that it may lead to a revival of interest in the Gospel, not only within the Church, but yonder where the sheep are without a shepherd and there are so many of them?

ANDREW K. WALTON.

*Edinburgh.*