

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

distinction which they do not believe to exist. In politics, an empirical treatment which ignores all but patent facts is sometimes the highest justice, because least liable to the possibility of error. No doubt can be cast upon the strict legality, although possibly upon the expedience, of the final course by which, in accordance with laws constitutionally passed and never yet repealed, the members of unauthorised Congregations have been expelled. The Jesuits share the condemnation of other illegal associations. If they have met with more severe treatment than the main body, it is simply the result of their self-chosen policy and of their more avowed hostility to the established Government. But while recognising that the cry for liberty comes with an ill grace from those who have always thwarted it, the student must feel that, in principle, no difference either of teaching or practice can be attributed solely to the Society of Jesus. Its members have only carried to inexorable conclusions the premises of the whole Church. A Jesuit is simply a logical Romanist.

JOHN DE SOYRES.

ART VI.—REMARKS UPON A SERMON

Preached before the University, and published in "The Cambridge Chronicle," on the Right Use and Interpretation of Scripture.

WE all, I suppose, recognise the right and the duty—the right in respect to his fellow-men, and the duty in respect to God—of every individual to exercise his own independent judgment in the interpretation of Scripture; and therefore we ought not to harshly condemn, nor attempt to authoritatively silence, any one because his opinions appear to us erroneous and dangerous. But while every one is justified in forming and defending his own interpretation of a passage of Holy Writ, no one, when propounding what he knows to be contrary to the doctrine of many who are highly esteemed in the Church, is justified in charging those who differ from him with ignorance, or prejudice, or party spirit. Yet this is by no means uncommon with men of a certain theological, philosophical, and critical school, who frequently speak and write upon subjects of controversy in an arrogant tone, as though they only had understood, and it were folly to contend with them. I have myself heard the modern notion, that the last twenty-seven chapters of the prophetic book which bears his name were not written by Isaiah the son of Amoz, spoken of by one of that school as admitting of no reasonable doubt, whereas he must have known

that theologians, certainly as learned and as competent to judge as himself, considered the arguments for the genuineness of those chapters in no degree invalidated by the objections which had been brought against it.

But a more painful instance, which recently came under my observation, is furnished by two sermons which were preached, in the spring of this year, before the University of Cambridge, and afterwards published in *The Cambridge Chronicle*. The fervent eloquence and evident sincerity of the preacher have justly gained for him a great influence, especially over the young; and therefore it is the more important that he should refrain from unduly exciting their feelings and warping their judgment by such passionate declamation and unwarrantable invectives as characterise these sermons. The professed object of the preacher, as described by him in the former of the two, to which alone I shall refer in this Paper, was to lead his hearers "to the impartial, unbiassed, fearless, truthful, and, above all, wise and loving study of the Holy Scriptures, by pointing out not only some of the follies, but some of the deadly evils, which have resulted from a neglect of the warning (2 Pet. iii. 16, a part of his text) that it is possible to wrest them to perdition." In accordance with the peculiar method proposed by him for promoting such a study of the Sacred Volume, the bulk of this first sermon is occupied with the description and denunciation of such errors and evils. Among them he mentions the assuming every precept of the Mosaic dispensation to be binding upon the Church under the Christian dispensation, the holding up "as a moral example the deed of Jael," and the "giving strange typical significance to the aberrations of Samson," which, he says, was "to violate every rule of tenable criticism; to introduce into religion a monstrous casuistry; to crush the very life out of an intelligent and honest faith."

One would hardly suppose that these or similar errors were so prevalent at the present day as to call for special condemnation. But the preacher seems to think they are; for he has taken occasion, from the mention of them, to observe that "the method of treating all Scripture as if every word of it were equally divine, though disclaimed in words, is pursued in fact alike by the learned and by the ignorant;" and that we "may see whole commentaries written, even in these days, upon the tacit assumption that Scripture is a talisman 'equipollent in all its parts,' of which even the most incompetent tacitly claim the power of infallible interpretation."

Now, upon this passage, without entering into the question of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, I would remark that the *written record*, which constitutes the *Scriptures*, may be all "equally divine," and yet not be "equipollent in all its parts;"

i.e., one book may not be of the same value with another, nor all the commandments given by God to his people in one age be binding upon his people in a subsequent age. I would remark, also, that the spirit which it breathes is hardly in accord with that in which he desires that his hearers should study the Scriptures. But another and yet greater fault which I find with it is its misrepresentation—not, of course, intentional, but still obvious and unjustifiable misrepresentation—of “his brethren in the Church of God.” Can the preacher mention any commentators who assume the Scripture to be such a “talisman?” Can he adduce any instance of “most incompetent” expositors who may justly be charged with claiming “the power of infallible interpretation?” He professes, and I doubt not sincerely, a willingness to devote his life to make known the truths of the Bible, and “to help to clear its interpretation from centuries of error;” but, if he would succeed herein, he must address himself to the task in a different spirit, and must avoid the vituperative tone which he has here adopted, and which pervades his whole sermon.

Having given a most vivid description of “the deadly evils” which “false claims [for the Scriptures] of infallible literalism” have done to mankind in resistance to the progress of science and civil liberty, in the support of slavery, in the usurped dominion of the Bishop of Rome, and in the persecution and burning of so called heretics and witches, he addresses the most solemn and earnest warnings to young clergymen and candidates for the ministry against falling into the errors of “Churches and sects and parties;” and being misled by “the masses of traditional systems which crowd the commentaries upon the Bible. “If,” he asks in one passage, “*corruptio optimi pessima*, ought we not to deplore, with all our hearts, the misuse of that book (the Bible) to the serious injury of mankind? Ought we not to strive, with all our hearts, that we, in our generation, may not be of the number of those who so abuse the light of heaven, as therewith to lead astray the souls of men?” “In the name of Christ”—this is his appeal in another passage—“in the name of all that He taught, in the name of all for whom He died, I do esteem it a matter of extreme importance that you should early be put on your guard against courses which have been so dangerous to mankind.” What these courses are he indicates afterwards, telling them that,

By Pharisaic hardness, by obstinate prejudice, by stiff-necked and unwarrantable dogmatism, by ignorant presumption which leads men to rush at once into anathemas of every opinion not their own, they may, indeed, gain earthly success, and become the idols of a party, and go about, as others do, slandering others as heretics, and saying of their brethren and their betters that they are “dangerous” and “pernicious” and “do not preach Christ.”

Again, in a subsequent passage, he says that they must not think—

It is saying Lord, Lord, which will save them. They may boast their familiarity with his name; they may claim to have preached nothing but Him crucified; but the cloak of Evangelical or of Churchman will not hide the sins of the Pharisee, nor will the iteration of angry shibboleths about the Divinity of the Saviour excuse the habitual violation of his new commandment. If they use texts as a goad to theologic hatred, and a hindrance to human thought, the whole spirit of the Scripture will rise up in the day of judgment against them, and condemn them for the wrong which they inflict from their idolatry of its letter.

Now, although "incredible harm" may have been "done to mankind" in past ages, and there may be danger of equal harm being done in the present age, by the misinterpretation and wrongful use of Scripture, it seems unlikely that the preacher's graphic and soul-stirring descriptions of the evils which he enumerates should be any protection against future errors. But, however this may be, I would ask whether his use of such language as "Pharisaic hardness," "obstinate prejudice," "stiff-necked and unwarrantable dogmatism," and "ignorant presumption," will be conducive to the cultivation of that temper of mind with which he would have his readers and hearers study the Scriptures? The proverb, "physician heal thyself," is suggested by the manner in which fierce invectives and earnest exhortations to a loving spirit are strangely mingled together.

I am constrained to express my painful conviction that the tone of this sermon, however just many of the remarks and eloquent many passages in it, is not suited to promote the object which the preacher desired—"the impartial, unbiassed, fearless, truthful, and, above all, *wise and loving* study of the Holy Scriptures;" but that, on the contrary, it cannot fail to confirm prejudices and provoke and embitter controversy. It was, I know, listened to with much indignation by many members of the congregation to which it was addressed. In reading it one can scarcely help feeling that it was dictated by a soreness of spirit in the preacher himself, and that, when he told his youthful hearers that, if they were "men enough to stand alone," if they dared to "run counter to popular opinion in the cause of truth," if they ever had the "courage to smite the hoary head of inveterate abuse," then they must "expect to share hatred and opposition with all the saints of God," he was thinking of himself, and of a controversy in which he had recently been engaged.

Upon the question involved in that controversy I forbear making any remark, except that there is no assumption of infallibility, no uncharitableness, no want of a loving spirit, necessarily

shown in holding, and contending for with an earnestness equal to his own, an opinion contrary to that of the preacher. The question is simply one of interpretation. Do the Scriptures, rightly understood, teach this or that doctrine? Surely this may be discussed by two opponents without any bitterness on either side; and the one who holds the opposite opinion, if he conscientiously believes the preacher's interpretation likely to endanger the salvation of his fellow-men, may, without any breach of charity—nay, being constrained by the love of souls, must—declare his conviction, and warn men of the risk they are incurring. It is altogether a false assumption of the preacher that the love and charity which he so highly commends belong exclusively to him, and to those who agree with him, and that “the conceit of a usurped infallibility,” the intolerance, and “the slandering of others,” which he so strongly condemns, are characteristic only of such as differ from him.

There are some other thoughts suggested by this sermon. While “the perversion of isolated texts” (of which, by the bye, that of a portion of his own text, “the letter killeth,” by the preacher himself, is a curious instance), “the use of the letter of Scripture to murder its spirit,” and “the strangling of its eternal principles by the misappropriation of its chance(?) expressions,” against which the preacher earnestly warns us, have doubtless led to many, and may lead to many more, grievous evils; it is to be remembered that they do not constitute the only class of misinterpretations of Scripture which have caused “incredible harm” to mankind; nor are they, as appears to me, the class against which the youth of our country, and in particular our younger clergy and students for the ministry, require to be especially cautioned at the present day. If there is a danger of perverting Scripture by laying too much stress upon the letter, there is also a danger of perverting it by keeping out of sight, or glossing over, its most plain and positive statements. If there be, as the preacher alleges, a “peril of following the mass of theologians” who have degraded “Scripture into a wrangling-ground for sectarian differences,” and “split it up into missiles to be used in fierce battle against our brethren in the Church of Christ,” there is also a peril of following others, who, thinking themselves to be wise above what is written, “concerning the faith have made shipwreck.” That we may be preserved from both of these dangers it is needful for us to study the Scriptures with a sincere desire to understand them, with a willingness to receive the doctrine which they contain, with an earnest endeavour to put aside all prejudices, with a humble consciousness of our liability to error, and with continual earnest prayer for the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit. Whosoever thus studies

them may confidently trust that he shall be preserved from all dangerous errors on the one side and on the other; and he will learn—while surely established himself in “the faith which was once for all committed to the saints,” and ready, when occasion requires, to contend earnestly for it—to put away “all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking,” and speak the truth in love.

In making these remarks I have been actuated by no unfriendly feeling towards the writer of the sermon to which they refer, but by a deep conviction of the injury done to truth and charity in the Church by the tone he has adopted in it. I the more lament this, because his intellectual power, his eloquence, his earnestness of purpose, and, I may add, his generous impulses, would, if exercised with more self-restraint, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, enable him to render most valuable service in promoting the progress of pure religion, and restraining ungodliness and vice throughout the land. If this Paper come under his eye, and anything I have said in it give him causeless pain, I shall willingly express to him my regret.

CHARLES PERRY (Bishop).

The Canonry, Llandaff.

Review.

The Supernatural in Nature; a Verification by Free Use of Science. By JOSEPH WILLIAM REYNOLDS, President of Sion College, and Vicar of St. Stephen's, Spitalfields. Second Edition. London: C. Kegan Paul & Co. 1880.

THIS is a second edition of a book which was published anonymously in the first instance. The demand for a second edition, and the appendage of the author's name to the title-page show that the book has acquired a certain amount of popularity and a not inconsiderable circulation. If the statement be true, that at a recent ordination in the Diocese of London a copy of this work was presented to each one of the candidates, the Bishop of London must be considered to have put the seal of his approval to it, and with a work of such pretensions as this, and of such considerable bulk, it is not to be supposed that he would have adopted this step without careful personal perusal and examination. Yet we have heard of cases where readers have found it impossible to complete the perusal of the book, still less to master its contents. For ourselves we confess to have found it very difficult fairly to appraise its value. At first we were disposed to think very highly of it; then followed a second stage, in which we were equally disposed to lay it down without completing the perusal of it. This weariness arose from its excessive discursiveness, what we may venture to call the garrulousness of its style, and the total want of that *lucidus ordo* which enables a reader clearly to apprehend an author's object, and to follow his process of thought. It is easy enough to read the successive chapters, or studies, as they are called, if the reader be