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I.—“HOW MAY THE MINISTRY INCREASE ITS EFFICIENCY AND USEFULNESS?”

NO. VI.

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THE series of articles which I am invited to conclude in the *HOMILETIC REVIEW* must have been looked for by many a minister of the gospel, when it was first announced, with anxious interest. The theme, “How may the Ministry Increase its Efficiency and Usefulness?” came straight to “our business and bosoms”; and it had happily been assigned to five notably effective and useful men—two of them pastors, an elder and a younger, and three of them experienced in training pastors for their work. If now any should question my title to a place at the triclinium in such company, I could only plead the invitation of our host, and the fitness of allowing one who is very painfully conscious of his ineffectiveness, to sum up the instruction and help that he has gained from these diverse sources.

The main suggestions that have been enforced upon us are: The need of a deeper personal conviction of the main truths of the gospel; a thorough honesty, loyalty and courage in declaring them, throwing into the message the whole force of the preacher’s personality; intellectual force sustained and increased by unremitting study, and thus commanding a hearing and an interested attention; Biblical study, as furnishing the preacher’s model and material and promoting his mental growth; friendliness and personal sympathy with the hearers; the spirit of prayer, in conscious dependence on God; finally, and not least in importance, we are counselled to keep in mind that preaching, in the narrow sense of the word, is only one, and not always the chief, of the multifarious functions by which the “effectiveness” of the ministry is attained. These seem to me the chief points of the several writers. Of course, thus detached from their setting and grouped in a syllabus, they lose their impressive force. But they are every one true, and every one important.

But I trust that it will not be charged as captiousness if I say, that I seem to have repeated, here, the experience of one of our earliest predecessors in the ministry, who, having sought counsel of the foremost pillars of the Church in his own time, remarked that "they who seemed to be somewhat, in conference added nothing to him." Looking back over a ministry already long, which, with all its defects and blemishes, has been laid out upon these very lines, I find in the counsels of these honored brethren little light to relieve my unfeigned perplexity over the question why my life's work has been so little effective compared even with the standard of my own generation. The warm commendations which my ministry has sometimes received from some of the best of men, and the not infrequent acknowledgments of those who have felt a peculiar debt of gratitude to it, only deepen my perplexity.

The Confessions of an Ineffective Man are a fit appendix to the counsels of his more successful brethren. I propose to speak of one or two points in which my ministry has been consciously weak, and then (with more diffidence) of that which has seemed to me a characteristic which I have done well to cultivate, as a factor in such effectiveness as it has been given me to achieve.

I find it an element of weakness, to be impatient of saying, and saying again, things that are common and even commonplace. The counsels to originality often urged (as in some of these papers) upon young preachers, while they are needed by some, are worse than superfluous to others. If to the natural misgiving of a very young man whether any one will be interested in what he has to say, is added a certain copiousness and freedom of thought, it will become the expression, not of his assurance, but of his self-distrust, that he habitually seeks to challenge attention by originality even to the point of paradox. He is afraid of falling into the commonplace—of saying an accustomed thing in an accustomed way—lest he forfeit the attention of his hearers.

Now, it is a characteristic of some notably successful preachers that their habitual preaching bears no strong mark of originality of thought or even of expression. The thought of many of my readers will spontaneously turn, for an example of this, to an eminent, honored and beloved metropolitan pastor, conspicuous among the clergy of the whole country for his wide, long-enduring and most useful influence both in the pulpit and out of it. By whatever criterion of usefulness his ministry is tried, it is not found wanting. And yet it is the common remark and wonder of many who listen to him with a view of discovering "the hiding" of his unquestionable power, that, so far as his ministry is distinguished, on this point of originality, it is distinguished by the absence of it. One comes away from the thronged assembly remarking, "he told me nothing I did not know before." Contrast

this with the ministry of Horace Bushnell—a man so impatient of saying anything just as it had been said before, or giving forth as from himself anything but what had been “hammered on his own anvil,” that he unconsciously created a new dialect of the English language, to be the vehicle of his new thoughts and new methods of thinking. No mind with any depth of soil could come into the most casual relation with him without receiving some seeds of thought that would spring and fructify. The mere titles of his sermons are nuggets of intellectual and spiritual wisdom. And the volumes of various discourse that he gave to the Press, after his voice was silent, have made the round of the world on missions of priceless value, comforting, instructing and confirming the disciples in the holy faith; by which he being dead yet speaketh, and is likely to speak to other generations yet. But considered as a parish minister he was not to be compared in point of “effectiveness and usefulness” to the famous pastor who never said a startling nor strikingly original thing, and whom the next generation will know only through an affectionate and grateful tradition. I am not at all sure that those traits of intellectual originality (even when kept rigorously within the bounds of doctrinal soundness) which make the effectively useful religious writer are not actually a hindrance to the best usefulness of the ordinary parish minister.

A second point of weakness which I recognize in my ministry of the Word is like the first, but not the same: it is a shrinking from the duty of iterating and reiterating truths which one has already set forth as it seems with sufficient clearness and demonstration. Once to have refuted a prevailing error, once to have enunciated a neglected truth, is not enough even with the most receptive audience. The preacher who would be effective with his message must take a motto from Isaiah, “line upon line, line upon line,” and must make exhortations to himself from the text of St. Paul, “to write the same things to you, for me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.” I remember, many years ago, hearing my father remark upon certain good work successfully done by a man whom he considered to be of inferior ability—“the man knows the power there is in iteration.” Sometimes from a pressure of important topics demanding utterance, sometimes from an unworthy pride of intellectual fecundity, one fails to hammer long enough on an important point to drive it *home*. There may be systematic repetition that is not wearisome but welcome. My brother George (of blessed memory) was in the regular habit, in his beautiful and fruitful work at Orange Valley, N. J., of repeating a sermon at the interval of about one year from the time it was first preached, after which he rarely recurred to it. His people used to look with pleasure for the year to come around and give them the second hearing of a sermon which they had once listened to with profit. Perhaps this method might not be safe for the rest of us. But by

some method we must manage to bring our people repeatedly, continuously, face to face with the truth they need, if this truth is to have adequate effect upon their mind and character.

For the benefit of younger men, I have freely called attention to what I have painfully learned to regard as weak points in my ministry. The reader will be the more tolerant toward me, now, if I venture to speak of a quality which I consider to have had much to do with whatever of real success my ministry has attained to. If I may be allowed to use a greatly reprobated word, it is the *objectivity* of it, as distinguishing it from the preaching that concerns itself much with the acts and processes and religious exercises of the mind. A certain amount of this latter work is doubtless necessary, especially for clearing away prevalent and mischievous errors. If it has been given me to render any useful service to practical theology, it has been in this very line, by defining what *faith* is, as an act of the mind. But this, after all, is only a negative service—the clearing away of factitious bewilderments and embarrassments. Men are not brought to the act of faith by an introspective study of the process of faith, but by setting before them the object of faith, and the reasons for faith. The chief way of bringing men to believe on Jesus Christ is to bring them to know Him. The better they know Him the more they will be likely to trust in Him. To lead men to a correct apprehension of the psychological process of faith not only does not make men believe—it does not even tend to do so—any more than a correct knowledge of the mechanism of the muscular system tends to make one use his muscles effectively. The effective work of the world is all done on false conceptions of muscular action. Every man (excepting the exceptions) conceives that by flexing the arm forcibly he bulges the biceps muscle. All a mistake! it is by contracting the muscle that he flexes the arm. But it is of no use to explain this to him from the manikin and set him to contracting the muscle. He may fix all his powers of will upon the biceps muscle till the crack of doom, without being able to contract a fibre of it. If you want to see that muscle bulge, you must give him a motive, or a provocation, to flex the arm, and as soon as the will is directed to the *object* all the muscular antecedents will take care of themselves. You have an idea that by inhaling a full breath you dilate the chest. It is all an illusion. You really dilate the chest by pulling up the ribs and flattening the diaphragm, and so the air rushes in. But, if you try to do this, you can't. You may spend your life in hearing physiological lectures and trying to work the intercostal muscles; but when all is done, the way for you to expand your chest will be by inhaling a full breath. Just so idle is it to try to get people to act by lecturing them about natural and moral ability, and explaining to them how their wills operate. All this discussion about the will has absolutely no place

in preaching, and is hardly less impertinent in theology. It is enough for the preacher to know that under pressure of motives, reasons, persuasions, affections, men will sometimes act. And it is not of the slightest importance that the *hearer* should know even this. When his desires are fixed on the object the appearance of the will is found to get itself a-working somehow. The great inducement to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The better one knows Him the more likely he is to trust in Him. The highest function of preaching is to bring men into personal acquaintance with Jesus Christ; and the best material of the best preaching is in the four gospels.

In what I have said thus far, I have simply fallen into line behind my predecessors as they have followed in the course laid out in the initial paper by Dr. Craven. We have considered our thesis as applying to "the Protestant ministry as at present constituted in America"; and (as becomes Homiletic Reviewers) we have given our main consideration to increasing the effectiveness of preaching, while recognizing that this is only one of the functions, and sometimes not the most effective function, of the minister of Christ. While we have merely glanced at the diversities of other ministrations which are required of each of us, it has been with a deep consciousness of the vast varieties of gifts which they presume, and a sigh, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

Consequently our discussion, How to increase the effectiveness of the ministry, has been narrowed to the question, How to increase the effectiveness of the individual minister—as if the Secretary of War, in reporting a plan for increasing the efficiency of the army, should confine himself to a study in hygiene and a recommendation of target-practice, designed to improve the personal strength and skill of the individual soldier. It will be a good time for the Church in America when it shall come to apprehend thoroughly that the effectiveness of the ministers is only a part of the effectiveness of the ministry; shall recognize the principle of the diversity of gifts and vocations; shall repent of the present wasteful no-constitution of the ministry to which it has condemned itself by the low, shabby competitions of its sectarianism; and instead of insisting that every minister shall do everything that pertains to the ministry, without regard to his special gifts or special inaptitudes, shall apply that maxim at once of common-sense and of Scriptural wisdom, *non omnia possumus omnes*.

What is that which, of late years, with the general advance of society, has most "increased the usefulness and effectiveness" of the medical profession as a body, especially in large towns, but specialization? Special gifts for a particular department of practice lead to special attention to it, special attention widens the special practice, this leads to increased skill again and so the specialization, or, as Mr.

Spencer would say, the "definite heterogeneity" of the profession grows, to the vast advantage of the public and of the profession, even of those members who are not themselves specialists. Meanwhile, in the clerical profession, we know only the old-fashioned "general practitioner."

The analogy is good and instructive. The country doctor, riding the round of his patients, must be a general practitioner—physician, surgeon, apothecary and dentist, all in one. But as soon as the number of doctors increases with the growth of large centralized populations, specialization of course begins and grows with the development of society. But in the same town which boasts its oculist and aurist, its operative surgeon, its specialists in throat and lungs, or in nerves and brain, there are a score of Christian ministers with aptitudes just as marked for the specialties of their profession. One has a charming faculty for preaching to children; another has a convincing, illuminating way with perplexed or skeptical minds; a third draws the street crowd in a throng that he somehow fails to fasten and organize; a fourth is pre-eminent as an organizer, and his church is distinguished for the efficient work of all its members; another yet has the enviable gift of bedside and fireside ministry, so that his very entrance into a house is a benediction.

Now, it is not to be desired, even for the interest of his specialty, that these men of diverse gifts should be wholly withdrawn from "general practice." But what vast increase of "the effectiveness and usefulness of the ministry" in that town, if the One Church represented in these mutually detached congregations could come to *know* that it is one and not many, and that all these variously gifted men, bearing each other's burdens, supplementing the inevitable defect and disproportion of each other's work, are colleagues in the ministry of the One Church of the town, and no longer competitors pulling against each other at cross purposes, with the idea that somehow the resultant of their several forces would be to the furtherance of the gospel!

Such increase of effectiveness is not unattainable in any town where are found pastors to whom personal, parochial and sectarian considerations are subordinated to the love of God and man and of the One Church. But it is not likely to be attained by waiting for the results of diplomacy between national denominations.