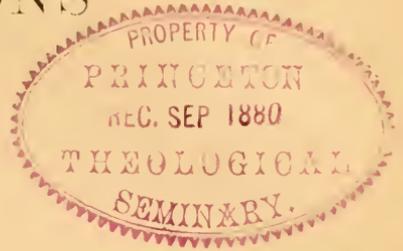


IMPRESSIONS



OF

DR. WADSWORTH

AS

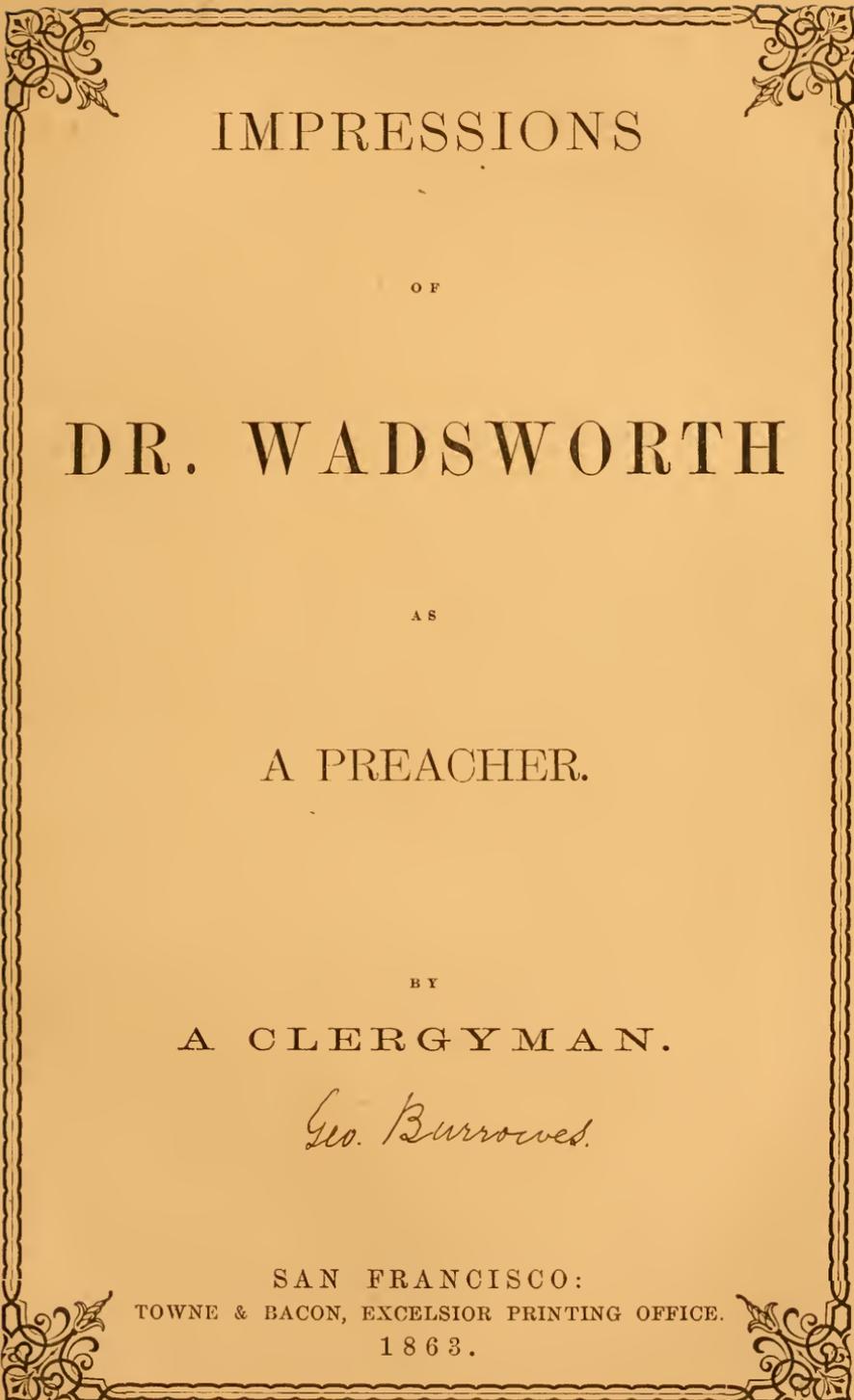
A PREACHER.

BY

A CLERGYMAN.

Geo. Burrows.

SAN FRANCISCO:
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In 1863, a party in Dr. Wadsworth's Church in San Francisco, who were determined to have back his predecessor, were acting towards Dr. W. in a way that excited my indignation; and, among other things, were saying he was no preacher. I wrote this pamphlet as a testimony to the impression made on me by his pulpit-power; and printed it at my own expense. The Session of Calvary Church who had heard of my purpose but had not seen the manuscript, urged me not to print it, and would not contribute to the expense. After reading it however they cheerfully made up the sum and repaid me. I wrote this after sitting under Dr. W. for one year. After hearing ^{him} constantly for three years, I endorsed these opinions even more fully. The opposite party never forgave me for writing this.

G. B.

DR. WADSWORTH AS A PREACHER.

THE labors of Dr. Wadsworth on the Pacific Coast have been attended with all the encouragement that could be desired by his friends. His church is crowded. Many persons are known to look forward with great pleasure during the business of the week, to the coming of the Sabbath, that they may again have the happiness of sitting under his preaching. A man of business and means, has come down regularly on Saturday afternoon in the steamer from a place one hundred and twenty miles distant, for no other purpose than to attend his church; and he says that such are the pleasure and benefit thus derived, he will gladly continue to do this, unless able to arrange his business and make San Francisco his home.

Those only who hear Dr. Wadsworth continuously, can have any just idea of his power as a preacher. His excellence grows on you by acquaintance. Forming, as is natural, an idea of his preaching from his reputation, persons who have never heard him, do not always find

him, on the first impression, the kind of preacher they had expected. Works and things bearing the impress of genius, whether in poetry, architecture, or painting, disappoint us on first observation. Time is needed for disclosing their depth of idea and elaboration of finish. We are disappointed; and our first impulse is to suppose they do not harmonize with our anticipations because falling below our level; the true reason is found in their rising above our standard. The same is true of a mind of elevated piety and genius in the pulpit. Strangers are consequently sometimes disappointed on a first casual hearing of Dr. Wadsworth. As time rolls by, the constant hearer loses sight of any thing at first viewed as a peculiarity, and marvels at the manner in which he brings from his treasure things new and old.

The prominent and most striking feature, is the tone of deep, earnest, simple-hearted piety that pervades all his ministrations. You cannot avoid the feeling, that he has begun his theological education by studying experimentally, at the feet of Jesus, under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, the truth, "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no wise enter therein."—Luke 18: 17. Those who have come expecting to meet literary splendor first and prominent, are disappointed by encountering on the threshold the simplicity and unction of the spirit of Jesus. They are ready to turn away disappointed, as this is not what they anticipated; yet in the unexpected

simplicity of this beauty, they find their attention arrested; and as they pause and gaze, they feel their incipient interest deepening into admiration. They find themselves listening not to a dreamer who is weaving poetical fancies, abstract metaphysical lucubrations spun from material drawn from God's word, into a drapery of vanity for adorning himself with its folds, but to the voice of the Spirit dwelling in the shrine of this spiritual temple and making the preacher "speak as the oracles of God." You feel that behind all he says there must be lying years of conflict and agony, of trials and sorrows, of deep gloom and despondency, of strong cries and tears, of heavenly fellowship and confidential friendship with God, of transforming views of the glory of Christ and homesickness to be away with Jesus: All this blended with deep study and meditation on the Scriptures, and assimilated by the fires of the Holy Spirit into a homogeneous mass with the living truth gathered from the word of God, finds utterance through the molding control of a brilliant, original, powerful mind, of a soul whose lips have been touched with a coal from Isaiah's hallowed fire. Literature with its riches and culture is laid under heavy requisition, yet kept in the proper place, as the servant of the sanctuary—not as the divinity enthroned in its shrine. The ornaments of his style, are not a painted rhetorical confectionery hanging like the appendages to a Christmas-tree, but the spring blossoms and autumn fruits clustering on a tree planted by the waters of life.

No preacher shows a deeper, more tender love for the Lord Jesus. In fullness and tenderness it is remarkable, "passing the love of women." This affection for the Redeemer gives a tinge to his whole style, and a tone to all his utterances. The intonations of his voice have a musical plaintiveness in harmony with the feelings of his heart. His prayers are remarkable. They are the natural outpouring of these blended emotions, truths, experiences, spiritual conflicts, and love to Jesus, gathered in his deepest soul. As a consequence, they are intensely devotional, going with subduing power to the heart, and melting down the feelings of the audience into a readiness for receiving the mingled instruction and pathos that follow. Brilliant as are his sermons in thought and language, they have in greater degree this unction of deep, tender, humble-hearted love to Jesus. They are golden urns filled with the sacred "beaten oil" of the sanctuary. They are like the golden vessels of the temple—not, as is too often the case, filled with the sparkling but intoxicating distillations at Belshazzar's feast—but filled to the brim, by the word of Him who was present at Cana of Galilee, with that love which is better than wine, and with that grace which is the fruit of the Spirit. While from his discourses, brilliant thoughts fly off in all directions, like the scintillations from the red-hot iron when struck on the anvil; like those scintillations too, these thoughts are ablaze with the baptism of heavenly fire. When the hostile forces before Troy, as represented by Homer, stood gaz-

ing in wonder at the falling star which came down from heaven at mid-day with a trail of sparkling brilliancy, the great beauty of the blazing meteor was not so much in the attractive light, as in the goddess around whose presence was thrown the drapery of that light; those who saw only the falling star, felt it beautiful; those who saw the divine messenger, the embodiment of heavenly wisdom, within that star, saw a deeper beauty, and felt a deeper joy. Thus, while these discourses pass before the fixed gaze of the soul, luminous with the splendor of brilliant thoughts and literary beauty, the penetrating eye of the believing heart feels their greater attractiveness is in the divine presence which this brilliancy embodies, the glowing manifestation there made of a living and glorified Redeemer. Brilliant thoughts are tessellated in his sermons, like the precious stones in the attire of the high priest; yet like the urim and thummim among the stones of the breast-plate—the light, and love, and presence of Jesus, throw over all a brilliancy from heaven.

Stronger than every other attraction, is the unction with which he preaches Jesus. His sermons are redolent with the fragrance of that name which is as ointment poured forth. They are full of Jesus and of heaven. They are exuberant in distillations of richer than Gilead's balm, from Him who binds up the broken-hearted, and comforts those who mourn. The sorrowing here find sympathy from contact with the truth of a sympathizing Saviour. He preaches consolation like a

man who knows how to succor others, because he has himself been compassed with suffering. His pathos goes to the very core of the heart. The feelings are gently, unconsciously raised to a degree where the tension, however delightful, often becomes painful; and the spell on the heart breaks in a luxury of tears. No man has greater power in so soothing the wounded heart and presenting the attractiveness of heaven blended with the glory of Jesus as to make the sinking spirit feel resigned under its heaviest burden, and look up with more than gladness from amid earthly toil and anguish, to the peacefulness of its final rest. Coming from the lips of one who has been made to "ride on the high places of the earth and drink the pure blood of the grape" beyond Jordan, his sermons are powerful in loosening the heart from earth, and in turning it with the eye of a home-sick soul, to its rest on the unseen hills with Jesus. The spirit yearns for the wings of immortality, as he portrays the attractiveness of heaven, and makes us feel,

"There thou shalt walk in soft bright light, with kings and priests abroad,
And thou shalt summer high in bliss, upon the hills of God."

With all his sympathy with sorrow, there is mingled the brightness of joy and hope. He turns toward the wretched the bright side of the cloud. In all his ministrations, he keeps blazing in the front the principle that concerning Jesus—

"There should not be a shadow of gloom
In aught that reminds us of Thee."

He makes religion synonymous with cheerfulness and consolation. Those who come to church only to gratify a literary taste, to gaze merely on the polished stones and carved work of the sanctuary, will find abundant beauties for their gratification. Those that come with the feelings of the Greeks to the temple, who said to Philip, "Sir, we would see Jesus," (John 12: 21,) will find themselves "abundantly satisfied with the fatness of God's house and be made to drink of the river of his pleasures." He loads the altar at which he ministers, not with chaplets and wild flowers gathered in Delphian vales and groves of Academus, but with clusters gathered in a richer than Eshcol, and with fruits from that tree which is for the healing of the nations.

As might be expected, this could not be done without giving the marrow of the Gospel. By the words "marrow of modern divinity," some persons seem to understand something different from the living principle of the Gospel fresh from its original springs. From the peculiar constitution of their minds and the character of their religion, coldly intellectual, with barely emotion enough to give any symptom of life, they crave an exhibition of Scripture which is set up in the cold form of a metaphysical skeleton, where the truth can be scanned as an exercise in logic or polemics, and the whole religious duty of man becomes a calm mental exercise, without trenching on the feelings and without going beyond the mere moralities of the world. By "the marrow of divinity" such persons seem to under-

stand the dry bones of divinity unbroken—the truth set up in a shape that puts it beyond the power of the hungry to get therefrom any nutriment. Such is the character of many a so-called doctrinal sermon—cold, hard, unattractive, repulsive, indigestible, incommestible. If by “the marrow of modern divinity” is meant, as some persons seem to mean, the dry bones of “Original Sin,” “Decrees,” and kindred topics, set before a congregation in such a way that they can only try the teeth of their formality and orthodoxy on them, like a dog gnawing a bone, and without getting from them any more nourishment;—then, those do not get it, who wait on Dr. Wadsworth. But if breaking the dry bones of Scripture texts and extracting from them the finest marrow, the quintessence of heavenly truth, and setting it before a people in such a way that their souls are “satisfied with marrow and fatness;”—if this is giving the marrow of divinity, then does Dr. Wadsworth give it to perfection. He excels in giving the marrow of the Scriptures. Passages out of the way and unnoticed, passages lying in the common track but passed neglected as hard, dry, and containing apparently nothing, he will gather up, and from them will extract delicious nutriment for the soul hungering and thirsting for righteousness. He finds the hidden manna in abundance where others do not suspect even its existence. Where other men would pass without casting even a glance at portions of Scripture deemed useless and dead as the body of the slain lion, he, like Samson, “turning aside

to see the carcase," finds these dead ceremonies of an abrogated dispensation and antiquated facts of a bygone age, swarming with truths rich and living, from which he brings forth to those who gather to these feasts of the soul, that which is "sweet to the taste, sweeter than honey and the honey-comb." He goes through the less trodden and out-of-the-way portions of the Scriptures, and with the instinct of genius guided by the inner light of the Holy Spirit, gathers gems and gold by others often passed unnoticed. Among the cliffs, and crags, and ravines of revelation, he notices and touches, under this same guidance, one and another jet of truth, which like gas brought in contact with flame, while escaping in the darkness, needed only to be touched by the fire of love from a brilliant mind, to blaze "like a torch of fire in a sheaf."

With a mind of high originality and an imagination of great brilliancy, Dr. Wadsworth is free from everything visionary and unreal. All is sobered by deep penetration and sound common sense. He possesses in an eminent degree the power of seeing Scripture in its relations to the circumstances and wants of those to whom he ministers. Some persons will receive from a hint an impulse that will give them a start and open before them a whole domain of unnoticed truth, while others will stumble over the same suggestion without getting a single new idea. From meager data a high mathematical intellect will evolve, by the aid of the calculus, valuable and surprising results, while others will

be at fault over a simple problem in algebra. The superior mind shows its superiority in working out important consequences from slender premises presenting to others only an impracticable puzzle. It is thus in handling the Scriptures. They are germs for the preacher to unfold according to the laws of the human mind and of a sanctified holiness. A strong mind filled with the Holy Spirit will evolve much from portions which others will handle without any important practical results. Dr. Wadsworth sees with remarkable penetration, not only what a passage was intended to teach in its primary application to those who first heard it, but what it was intended to teach us. He has the faculty of elaborating from the Scriptures their practical element, as bearing on present things. He is eminently a practical preacher. He does not give long skeleton-sermons, as dry as "Ridgley's Divinity," with what is called "a practical application" at the end, as if the doctrinal and the practical were to be kept asunder, although the great Author of truth and duty forbid such a divorce, when he at first published between them the bans. A striking feature of his sermons is the manner in which he blends the doctrinal and practical, causing doctrine, when not visible in its naked form, to furnish the bone and muscle of the discourses which he sets before us in the freshness of the flesh and beauty of practical life. In reading Shakspeare you do not see the naked frame of a system of metaphysics; yet was Shakspeare the greatest of metaphysicians. He gives

us these profound abstractions in the guise of living things. And thus Christian doctrine stands before us in these discourses, embodied in practical duties, and in the attractive beauty of real life. Truth is presented not in an abstract, hard, indigestible shape, which the heart cannot assimilate; in theological essays deep and "clear, but O how cold;"—we receive "the pure milk, the pure cream, of the word." Even in his sermons professedly doctrinal, we find this singular and peculiar charm. When leaving the church after having heard discourses on the abstract points of our faith, persons familiar from childhood with the instructions of the best pulpits in the large cities of the East, have remarked that such topics, when heretofore treated, had always been set forth in so dry and unattractive a manner as to seem incapable of being invested with the beauty and interest thrown around them by Dr. Wadsworth. His statements of doctrine are discriminating and clear; and casting aside arguments weak or used merely to show the writer's acuteness, he selects the few fitted to strike the minds and hearts of his own audience, and drives them home with the effectiveness of "nails fastened in a sure place." His doctrinal sermons are not metaphysical intangibilities fitted for the theological tomes or the polemical congregations of two hundred years ago, but living nourishment adapted to the existing state of things among the flock of his own fold.

No preaching can be popular without being practical. His preaching is eminently practical. It shows great

shrewdness and penetration into the heart and into the motives operating in daily life. It owes not its interest to startling novelties; it does not draw its power from oratorical elocution. It is not rhetorical; it is not flowery; it is not metaphysical. It is not addressed to some particular fancy or idiosyncrasy of the day. You cannot detect in him any shade of resemblance to the features of the family of sensation-preachers. He has nothing in common with them. The very appearance of the man in the pulpit shows his abhorrence of clap-trap and cant. You see that self is left in the background. His case is a fulfillment of the promise, "He that shall humble himself, shall be exalted."—Matt. 23: 12. He shrinks from public notoriety, public demonstrations, and public applause. He possesses eminently, so much so that it is a deficiency in his character, the very unusual disposition to undervalue himself and his productions. He cannot understand how he could ever be viewed as a preacher of mark and power. The crowds that have ever hung around his ministry, are to him alone a mystery. After sermons under which all hearts in a crowded congregation are melted down, and recover from their breathless and even painful attention with admiration and tears, he alone will sit down overcome with a sense of failure and of little worth in so magnificent an effort. Nor is this feeling of personal shortcoming and unworthiness a mere pretense, a maneuver for drawing forth expressions of admiration. It is a deep, honest conviction, resulting from a consti-

tutional peculiarity that can never be removed. A humility so unfeigned, allied with so much greatness, and mellowed, no less than deepened, by divine grace, throws a great charm around the character, and gives an attractiveness seldom met in such a world.

Thus ignoring self and feeling his dependence on God, he seems to make it his aim to discard everything likely to interfere with his doing good to the souls of his hearers. He weaves no chaplets of flowers around the sword of the Spirit. Not a superfluous rhetorical ornament can be found in his discourses. He does not, while the children are asking for bread, give them a stone. He strives to do good to the whole soul of man as a sinner in danger of perishing. I have never heard more direct, more pungent, more powerful appeals than some of his, to the impenitent. He presents the truth so as to interest and benefit the weakest, while he instructs and makes the strongest marvel. The humblest Christian, with hands hardened and cheek furrowed by toil, may be seen side by side with the man of professional culture and wealthy ease, both listening with equal interest and both equally bathed in tears. His argumentation is peculiar, close, compact, and strong; not with a long concatenation of ideas wearying the mind to keep in hand the whole train of thought from first to last, but with a powerful condensation, till it glows like a diamond, and is grasped as easily as our vision grasps a star,—so comprehensive as to satisfy the mind of widest grasp, and so compact as to be received

by the humble intellect without an effort. Some of his statements of controverted points are, in the compass of a single sentence, more convincing than many a labored argument. Such is the condensation that you have not time to cavil and sift the premises, before your judgment is forced, much as in the case of self-evident truths, to admit the conclusion. It presents a remarkable combination of simplicity, condensation, clearness, and strength. Even when—

“ In thoughts more elevate, he reasons high
Of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate,”

you are not “in wandering mazes lost;” but can always—which cannot often be said on this subject—carry away something satisfactory and clear.

Allied with this, is a polished wit and effective sarcasm. Never have we seen these things used with such propriety in the pulpit. In these things, Addison was not more polished, nor in better taste. The most rigid decorum and the most sensitive piety, so far from finding anything to condemn, must cheerfully say that Dr. Wadsworth employs these weapons wisely and effectively on the side of religion, in the house of God. They are delicate and dangerous things, seldom to be trusted in the hands of human frailty at the sacred altar. He uses them only at intervals, but with such propriety and sweeping power, that their appearance is hailed with delight by the meekest and most devout spirit. Objections to the Scriptures, which have seemed strong, and

around which some men would go again and again in labored argument, his wit demolishes at a blow. His sarcasm, delicate and subtle, with the finest edge of irony and in the best taste, is withering and overpowering. Like lightning from a clear sky, when least expected there is a flash and a smash; and nothing remains but the ashes of the empty structure infidelity had so proudly reared. The counter-blow is so truly aimed and so effective that you cannot repress a smile at the pitiable plight of the foe who lies dismantled at his feet. Sometimes, in passing, he makes a thrust at some of the empty fooleries of the day which loom up in such gigantic proportions, and they shrivel under the touch of his sarcasm, like the colossal genius under the wand of the magician in the oriental tale. His wit is truly a polished shaft worthy of being laid up among the furniture of the sanctuary and of being employed in its defense. No armor in which infidelity encases itself, is of such proof as to prevent these fiery arrows from piercing "between the joints of the harness."

On hearing some persons speak of Dr. Wadsworth's delivery, we have been reminded of the complaints made by the dull martinets beaten by Bonaparte in Italy, when they maintained that although the young general uniformly defeated them with such overwhelming results, he should be stripped of his epaulettes because his maneuvers were so totally contrary to the old rules and their own expectations. They could not understand how genius could reach such splendid results

by means and modes not familiar to their own plodding brains. Judged rigidly by the rules of elocution, his delivery, like that of Demosthenes, may show points where many a prosy speaker would be less faultless. Yet we feel sorry for those who are ready to cavil at anything in efforts where the general results are so good and so grand. With us, the disposition to criticise is lost in the impulse to admire and feel grateful. We leave willingly to those who can stoop to it, the littleness of carping and caviling at unessential things, amid so much that is great and good. They may, if they choose, find fault with the diamond because there is a trifling speck : we are more than willing to take it as it is, with thankfulness for the great beauty and treasure it contains. Whatever may be said of his action, it is soon felt to be part and parcel of his thoughts and emotions, the spontaneous outgushing of his deep feelings, carrying with its intense earnestness and transparent simplicity a touching power on the heart that no studied precision, however faultless, could equal ; and which no hearer who enjoys the luxury of the spell produced by the speaker's blended peculiarities and endowments, would wish to see meddled with or changed. We would have nothing different, lest the magic spell be broken. While persons whose mind would be startled in affright at the apparition of an original idea, and could no more control a strong conception than could Phaeton control the coursers of the sun, would spend their little strength on little things incapable of producing even little results,

he, with perfect ease, evokes deep thoughts and brilliant ideas in the gorgeous drapery of an ideal world of his own creation, and as powerfully as Prospero in "The Tempest," controls them at his will. We care not how the magician waves his wand, whether gracefully or ungracefully, if he will but people the air around us with this crowd of brilliant imaginings fresh from the world of thought, and make them pass with all their splendor and power in this whirlwind of feeling over the soul. We have repeatedly seen a crowded audience under the power of this peculiar eloquence, when to them could be applied the words of the great magician to those under his potent spell, in "The Tempest:"

" There stand,
 For you are spell-stopped.
 Mine eyes, even sociable to the shew of thine,
 Fall fellowly drops. The charm dissolves apace,
 And as the morning steals upon the night,
 Melting the darkness, so their rising senses
 Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle
 Their clearer reason."

None but a great orator could produce on such congregations, for years in succession, the effects so uniformly produced by Dr. Wadsworth. Nor could the same effects be produced even by his own burning words, through any other delivery than his own. The attempt to superinduce any other delivery on his thoughts and style, would be as incongruous as covering the neck and hands of Jacob with goat-skins—"the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." Moreover he does not take off the edge of his eloquent

thoughts and appeals by dwelling too long on them. You never weary under a tedious elaboration. You are not kept looking at the glass till the foam and sparkle have gone, and the wine grows vapid. He fulfills the requirements of the highest criticism—"Oratory, like the drama, abhors lengthiness; like the drama, it must keep doing. It avoids, as frigid, prolonged metaphysical soliloquy. Beauties themselves, if they delay or distract the effect which should be produced on the audience, become blemishes."

His treatment of Scripture is, throughout, original and exhaustive. A lawyer remarked that he had been in the habit, when a text is announced, of forming some idea in his mind, what might be the outline of the following discourse; but that in reference to Dr. Wadsworth's treatment, he was always far astray in his conjecture. Bold and original, brilliant and suggestive, not only scattering original ideas with profusion, but throwing around familiar ideas a drapery so new as to make us often fail at first glance to recognize an old acquaintance,—he is nevertheless free from what is erratic, erroneous, and startling. No coquetting with false philosophy, no fool-hardy venturing on the precipices of error, no vamping up of exploded follies for gaining a name for originality and independence, unsettles your confidence and enjoyment. The impression made by portions of some of his sermons reminds you of a scene in winter, when trees and shrubbery coated with icicles are brilliant from the morning sun; or of a landscape in the

truth disclosed to his meditative soul, that he can afford to leave to weaker minds and less spiritual hearts the folly of seeking the reputation of deep thinkers, by bringing into the pulpit divine truth bedizened with metaphysical speculations and far-fetched foolishness, in grotesque and painful masquerade. He preaches Jesus fully, as the doctrine of Jesus is embodied in the standards of his own Church. There is no slurring of any doctrine because unpopular or unpalatable. The boldness of thought and imagination, which would carry off some minds with an eagle's flight into the regions of speculation and error, is with him so sobered by true godliness as to keep him steady in the old paths trod by prophets and apostles.

He is particularly happy in expanding Scripture, in catching the true meaning and carrying out what the Holy Spirit would thereby indicate. He is eminently suggestive. He gives as the result of his elaborations not only new thoughts fully developed, but new ideas, involving and suggesting trains of thought for us to follow out in future hours. He has eminently the poetic constitution of mind which is necessary for grasping and unraveling the figurative language of Scripture, and evolving the varied truths hid in the involutions of its rich and beauteous folds. He seems the minister of a better than the old Jewish sanctuary, opening before you the vail of purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, while shaking pearls and gems from its folds. The metaphors, the shadows, the figurative language of the

Scriptures, appear in newness of life under the light he gathers around them. As he opens up a passage, perhaps a single clause only, from some historical narrative, you wonder there is so much in it; and so simple, yet so suggestive does it seem, so clear and so adapted to the wants of your heart—the wonder is you never before saw it in such a light. Like the persons surprised in the depth of the forest with beautiful music, in Milton's "Comus"—around you, in places of Scripture where you are least expecting it,

“Sweetly do soft and solemn-breathing thoughts
Steal like a steam of rich distilled perfumes.”

It is like breaking the seal on Mary's box of perfume—the whole house is filled with the fragrance.

A prominent trait in the character of Dr. Wadsworth is his exemplification of the command, "Follow peace with all men."—Heb. 12: 14. His nature shrinks from controversy and strife. No man can strive more carefully to fulfill the words, "As much as lieth in you live peaceably with all men."—Rom. 12: 18. And the beauty of this trait consists in its being found in his character in alliance with an adherence to sound doctrine which nothing can shake, with a calmness which knows no fear, and with a firmness which nothing can control.

Those who have sat longest under his ministry will feel that the efforts of Dr. Wadsworth are among the remarkable pulpit-ministrations of the day. In general

characteristics they bear a resemblance to those of the Rev. Henry Melvill, of London. The character and endowments of her sons constitute the wealth of the Church; and it is only by recording the impressions of individuals, that the fleeting realities which manifest character, can be arrested and embalmed for the treasure of future times.