



JAMES FAIR LATIMER, PH. D., D. D., LL. D.

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I. LITERARY.

DR. LATIMER AS KNOWN BY UNION SEMINARY
STUDENTS.

PROFESSOR T. C. JOHNSON.

OUR Seminary has sustained a great loss in the death of Dr. James Fair Latimer. His long illness terminated mortally March 31st. This fact will have ceased to be news to the general public long before this page reaches the reader's eye. And our religious weeklies, as well as daily papers, will have given accounts of the important events in Dr. Latimer's life, as well as various characterizations of him.

Accordingly, we confine ourselves to what *we* saw in the man, as a teacher, as a preacher, as a friend of students, as a member of the community, in his family, and as a man with a life to live for God and man.

In what we shall say of him regarded in these several particulars, we shall try to avoid exaggeration of Dr. Latimer's excellences on the one hand, and failure of appreciation on the other. We shall speak as far as possible, not simply out of the experience of one student, but of many, and those not of any one class, but of five or six classes.

1. *As a teacher* Dr. Latimer was remarkable for power to enthuse the student with love to the branch of study which he taught, for sympathetic adaptability to the individual student's standing-point and ready appreciation of the student's difficulties, for both breadth and depth of acquaintance with the subjects which he treated, for the confidence which he inspired in

his conclusions as worthy of trust, and for being intensely in earnest in his work.

His power to enthuse the student with love for his department sprung in part from the fact that he himself was a growing man. His soul was in motion. Like Paul he counted not himself to "have obtained," but pressed forward with loins girt and with eager effort. He felt and betrayed the exhilaration of a growing man. His students looking on a soul in joyous action were themselves moved to action. He had besides a profound love of truth, and the truth in his own grand department. He had tasted and seen that Jehovah's truth, like Jehovah himself, is good. Like teacher, like students.

His sympathetic adaptability to the student and appreciative grasp of the student's difficulties, were the offspring of a naturally kindly disposition, of a conscientious effort to make himself sympathetic and appreciative in order to perform to advantage the office of a teacher, of a native quickness of mind, and of a personal experience with difficulties. Some men are so constituted as to work with little friction. They reach conclusions, often correct, without dreaming of difficulties. Dr. Latimer was not so. He never glided to a result. He fought his way to it. If there were difficulties, he was almost sure to find them. And if he experienced the mental worry and the physical wear and tear which usually flow from such an accident of the mind as the tendency to find difficulties, he was yet admirably fitted thereby for apprehending the difficulties of his students.

The impression which Dr. Latimer made as to his extensive acquaintance with the subject of Church History and profound insight into it was a just impression. He read broadly in his department. The ambition which, in his unsanctified and unregenerate youth, made him determine, while at Erskine College, S. C., that he would lead his classes or die, *here* made him count not his life as dear unto him provided only he did his work to God's glory and man's good. And he tried constantly to read beneath the externals of history. In his inaugural, delivered in 1885, he said: "The true student of history knows that the story of the past, read simply as the narrative of events, is not history. The problem which presents itself to him is not merely, What are the facts? but, What are the inner relations of the facts? He recognizes it as his task to trace effects to their causes, and to read the character and im-

portance of the causes in their effects. He knows that, not always that which is obtrusive and on the surface, but often what is obscure and easily escapes detection because of its apparent insignificance, is the really efficient and determining factor." These words show the man's ideal. It is the testimony of many of his most intelligent students, that Dr. Latimer reached out well after this ideal; that he showed himself a "true student of history"—capable of looking into the hearts of historic movements, and tracing great results back to apparently insignificant tendencies. He who has read the Doctor's article on the Lollards* can make an approximate estimate at once of the character of his research and historic insight.

Confidence in his conclusions naturally followed from a recognition of his extensive and profound knowledge of the subject which he taught. But another trait for which Dr. Latimer was distinguished added to the confidence thus resulting—his *candor*. He was a singularly candid teacher. If he was in doubt about a question he would indicate his doubt. If he was ignorant about a matter, and there was occasion, he would declare his ignorance. He was aware that there were limitations to his own, as to everybody's else, knowledge. He made no cowardly efforts to conceal the limits of his own. About many a question he would say, "I don't know." And a mistake known and that might, consequently, be acknowledged, was much better than a mistake undiscovered. Such candor, such truth, was a pledge that he would never knowingly be a false guide. And this fact taken in connection with his thorough scholarship called forth, as a matter of course, respect for his conclusions.

In earnest devotedness to his work we have hardly known a man who surpassed the subject of our sketch. He was at it—at it *with all his might*. He had no time for retailing stale or undignified jokes in the class-room, or jokes of any sort unless they could be made to subserve a high end. He had no time for vapid rhetoric which clothed no substance of thought. He had no time for questions of the "mint, anise, and cummin" order. There was too earnest a purpose in him for that. Inspiring, helpful, able, safe, earnest. Such he appeared as a teacher.

* *Presbyterian Quarterly* April, 1888.

2. *As a preacher* he reached all classes in the audience ; he made the hearer regard the hearer's self as in relation to a just, a holy, but a loving God ; he stirred the hearer to the use of the graces in his possession ; he stimulated a craving for more of those graces.

It is a difficult thing to reach effectively all classes of hearers in the ordinary heterogeneous audience. It is a peculiarly difficult thing to preach in a college town a sermon that will prove of special interest to the student body and yet supply the spiritual destitutions of the house-matron and the man of business, and make *them* go home thanking God for the good the preacher has given *them* as well as for that given the boys. Not a few fail of it sadly. The non-student auditors look upon them as preaching altogether to the students. If Dr. Latimer felt the difficulty, he surmounted it nobly. The hoary-headed professor, the student of every degree, and as well the man of business occupation, and ladies young and old, were all reached by his preaching. His success in this respect was due in part to clearness of statement and orderly development of his thought. Who does not know the charm of clear talking and of methodical plan of discourse ? It is as much more beautiful than confused talking as clear water is more beautiful than muddy water. But many other men have equaled Dr. Latimer in point of lucid perspicuity, who yet could not in any corresponding degree reach an audience. He was not only clear in statement, he was intensely in earnest. The earnestness which distinguished him in his youth while at college, which characterized him in his war record, which was so remarkable a feature in his class-room work, was naturally rendered more profound and intense when he handled the vital themes appropriate to the sacred desk. This quality the most superficial hearer remarked. There was no possibility of any one's not seeing it. It moved the Doctor to striking action (too striking perhaps for his best physical health), to energetic and emphatic tones. Nor was there any possibility of failure to see that it was genuine. There was never a lapse into slackness. There was rather in the preacher's attitude and manner a proclamation that neither voice, nor word, nor gesture, had been sufficient to make the truth as much to the hearer as the speaker would like to have made it. This trait, of course, gave him great power with all classes. An honest, genuine, earnest man is always powerful. From the days of Peter the Hermit,

and from John the Baptist, such an one has always found a hearing.

Moreover, Dr. Latimer chose his topics wisely. The universal needs of man were the needs which secured his deepest concern. To this class of needs he delighted to minister. And, after all, these are the profoundest needs of almost every hearer. A man who preaches to them is going to meet with response.

It is interesting and may be instructive to note, that the subjects of the sermons which he preached during the last three years before his death, contained among them such as these: "Sonship in the Family of God," "Eternal Life in the Son," "The Greatness of John the Baptist," "As a Man Soweth So Shall He Reap." It was a noticeable characteristic of his preaching that he addressed with success his messages to man not as to an isolated unit, but as in relation to God—a God that loathes sin, a God who will punish sin, a God just and holy, a God, nevertheless, who loves the sinner in spite of his sin, in relations *already*, to God and His plan, to a *personal* God. Hence he made the hearer look at himself as in God's sight in every deed.

He stirred the hearer to the use of the graces which he had and made him long for more of grace. I might speak in almost the very language of some of his hearers after more than one of his sermons, and say: "Oh, he has broken me all up"! "I feel so unworthy and weak and mean"! "It makes me quite sick to think how unworthy I am of all God's goodness unto me, how great a sinner I am against His grace"! "How great God's grace is"! "How deep is His mercy"! "Herein is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins."

3. *As friend to the students* Dr. Latimer stood on the same high level which he occupied as teacher and preacher.

He was easily approachable. Every student who comes to this Institution, comes to a faculty every member of which is his friend, and to a neighborhood all the people of which are his friends. Every home and fireside is open to him. And at every table his presence is welcomed. Nevertheless, there are differences where all are hospitable and friendly. One friend we approach with reserve and restraint. Another friend we run to with the delightful freedom of perfect unreserve. Dr. Latimer was a friend of this latter sort to many students.

There was nothing whatever of the forbidding or austere about him. There was nothing whatever either of self-absorption, or of exclusive absorption in his work, when in the presence of his students. No matter how great his burdens of work, and he always made them great, no matter how heavy his troubles, and they were not light, he had a cheer face for his students. This was a conspicuous fact during the last months of his stay with us. His apparent cheeriness to almost all who met him, was the subject of frequent remark. Yet we know that gloom hung over him. He was hyper-conscientious, and as he felt his increasing weakness and realized his increasing inability to instruct his classes, he reproached himself for not having resigned at the end of last session; he imagined that he had committed great sin in continuing to hold his professorship. We know that this was all morbid, and full of injustice to himself. I suppose that the only thing wherein any member of the Board of Directors would be disposed to find fault with him is, that he did not take the whole year in vacation as they arranged for him to do. But under the influence of physical disorder, he took a different view of the case. And yet as long as students saw him, they were impressed with his sunniness. Nor was this sunniness assumed as a mask. It was as natural to him as his energy and enthusiasm. It sprang out of his universal sympathies with young men. And his sympathy it is which accounts for his accessibility.

Few men have had more sympathy for all classes of young men. I have sometimes thought of him, "He wants nothing of being a young man of universal experience, potentially at least." The aspiring young man found in him an ardently aspiring older brother. The plodder found in him one who plodded incessantly, and rejoiced in it. The profane worldling youth found in him a man who gave him compassion without contempt. And the repentant sinner found in him a pitying love that was, in spite of imperfections, Christlike. One who should know him better perhaps than any one else living, said: "The secret of Mr. Latimer's popularity was his desire to help everyone that was down. He did not care about those who were getting on well. But he was earnest to help all who needed help." This was particularly true in respect to young men. It is not any wonder, then, that in Memphis, where he was pastor, young men of all degrees of morality approached

him to talk on the subjects of morals and religion. Nor is it any wonder that the students here were his enthusiastic friends. His sympathy made him make his young friend's crosses or joys his own crosses or joys. And if his help could avail anything, it came forth spontaneously. And because he entered into the situation of his young friend so fully, that friend regarded the advice Dr. Latimer gave as worthy of a consideration, which he would not have accorded that of a man equally wise and prudent but colder and less sympathetic.

The Doctor's candor, too, to his friends, was as unmistakable, while considerate, as his candor in the class-room. The student did not doubt that what he said he meant, and that what he meant, he said. Accessible, sympathetic, a competent adviser, candid, he was a very *valued* friend of the student.

4. *As a member of the community, as a member of his family, as a man,* Dr. Latimer won the respectful admiration of every thoughtful and attentive student.

Our village community is very small. It engages in little that one could call public enterprise without a smile. "Measures for the public good" is perhaps quite an unused phrase in our vocabulary for local operations. Nevertheless, Hampden-Sidney is like other places in that there are common wants, albeit ours are very simple. And straws show how the wind blows. And every sprouting pastor here could have seen by frequent evidence that Dr. Latimer recognized his obligations to the community; and that, had the Doctor been pastor in any community, he would have had a relative interest in all that concerned the community. He was interested in everything in which his neighbors had an interest. He was ready to help along any feasible scheme of improvement. He was, also, fertile in suggesting possible plans. And as he carried his habits of drastic investigation to the study of these practical businesses, his mature conclusions were generally of value. Perhaps, a little more caution in concluding on such matters, which were the subject of but incidental study at most, had been preferable. Yet, it is better to make a small mistake, now and then, than to show a supine indifference as some preachers do concerning like subjects.

It is not our purpose to lift the veil from his hallowed family life further than to say, he carried the same qualities into his home which the more outside world of students saw. He

seemed to have studied the members of his family and his duties toward them lovingly, and having made an affectionate mastery of the situation, to have tried to live the life suited thereto.

His life looked at in all its forms of expression toward God and man, was apparently *for* God and man. It was an eager, strong, broad, deep, high life. It was a life of exalted humility. It was a noble, manly, after no mean sort, a Christ-like life.

We cannot close this paper without expressing our regret that he has left such scanty remains in the way of writings. Of published writings, the thesis for his doctorate at Leipsic, his inaugural of 1885, his "Lollards," to which previous reference has been made, his "Baptism In The Old Testament And The New," two very excellent sermons which have appeared in our SEMINARY MAGAZINE, a half-dozen book notices, constitute the major part. It is to be hoped that at least a modest volume of his sermons may be published and thus his influence perpetuated through written words. Thank God! his influence will never die. The men who have been moulded by him will mould other men with some trace of the same pattern, and they others.



JF