

# THE HOMILETIC REVIEW.

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## REVIEW SECTION.

### I.—THE PREACHER AND THE PREACHING FOR THE PRESENT CRISIS.\*

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#### IV.—THE PREACHER AND HIS FURNISHING.

*A Different and Better Training.*—Having a commission to meet so great a crisis, the question naturally comes up: What manner of man should the preacher be, and what furnishing will best fit him for the special work of this present time? We answer:

*He needs to be a man who has complete mastery of the situation, of himself, and of the Bible message.*

There is not space in this connection for dwelling upon the present crisis of unbelief, that makes it so hard for the church to meet the demands of the great world-crisis in missions, and increases so vastly the difficulty of the minister's work for the world. Assuming some degree of familiarity, on the part of our readers, with the facts and causes of the materialistic and secular *zeitgeist* and of the trend of popular opinion toward anarchism along all lines, it is proposed to turn attention to two requirements made upon the ministry, in the present situation: (1) that of a different and better training; and (2) that of a better outfit of knowledge and skill. The first of these requirements will furnish the theme of the present paper.

The preacher who would succeed in the highest sense in these times requires a different and better training of his various powers for the work in which he is engaged.

1. It may seem quite obvious, yet it needs to be especially emphasized, that a better and different training of the logical faculty is indispensable in the present age.

The bane of the age is the indefinite, indistinct, incoherent thinking that is kept so constantly before the public through all the popu-

\*The subject treated in this series of sketchy articles will be published later in book form, greatly extended so as to cover the vital current topics connected with it, in more systematic shape. The series copyrighted.

would go far toward maintaining his intellectual life in full vigor, while furnishing him with the best training for sermon-construction and keeping him in constant and familiar contact with the greatest thought of the race.

The completion of the work of developing the constructive faculty requires the constant exercise of that faculty in the actual work of construction. Every recitation, and every exercise in a course of study, may be made an exercise of this power; and only as they are so made is study transformed, from a dead, dull drudgery in the use of the senses or memory, or the mere logical faculty, into a joyous and free activity that leads on to higher effort and encourages in such effort.

There is no comprehension of any great subject to be had without such constructive study and training. Without it there can be no preparation to handle such subjects. But such constructive study and exercise are peculiarly essential in training the preacher to preach the Gospel. Nothing short of this will prepare men for the direct, free, and effective preaching so essential for reaching the masses. The increase in the number of studies and of side issues in our seminary work has doubtless strongly tended to the elimination of that constructive work, once a somewhat prominent factor in those institutions. Correct educational method requires that there should be a return to it, nay more, that the chief intellectual energy of the student in his work should be made to take this direction.

If that better preparation needed by the new order of the ministry called for in the present crisis, is to be had by the church, it must be by securing a training better than the present and different from it mainly in the respects that have just been particularized. And let it be emphasized that, to the church and the preacher alike, this is at the present time a matter of supreme importance.

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## II.—WHAT A PREACHER MAY LEARN FROM THE WRITINGS OF DR. OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

BY JAMES O. MURRAY, D.D., DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY, PRINCETON, N. J.

A WRITER in *The Spectator*, some few years ago, called Dr. Holmes "the Montaigne of American literature." It was intended for high praise, yet in some respects the comparison is grossly unjust. The differences between the two are far greater than the resemblances. From the uncleanness which so often befouls the pages of the French essayist, Dr. Holmes's pages are not only absolutely free, but in contrast have a wholesome purity and sweetness, which are an unfailing charm. Montaigne was a Pyrrhonist: he doubts for the sake of doubting. Anything like moral earnestness is never found in his writings.

The gay mockery of the Frenchman always peeps through the thin disguise of a serious vein occasionally used. Nothing of this sort is found in Dr. Holmes. He is pronounced in his dislike of what is called "Evangelical theology." For Jonathan Edwards he seems to have had an aversion, which, as his paper on the great divine \* shows, renders him incapable of judging correctly either the man or his theology. But the Christian church everywhere is singing hymns written by the American essayist. Much of his writing has the tone of belief about it. He is never the flippant skeptic. In all that pertains to religious beliefs, his writings show moral earnestness, however far they diverge from Evangelical doctrine. And though he cannot be acquitted of a too bitter or acrid sarcasm in his flings (*e.g.*, his allusion to Jonathan Edwards's presidency of Nassau Hall, "Pages from an Old Volume of Life," p. 394), yet there are many passages in his writings breathing a lovely and chastened air of religious belief.

The sources of interest in Dr. Holmes's writings for a homiletical student are not wholly theological. They cover a wide field and touch on human interests in their deepest, most vital, and sometimes most sacred forms. The preacher not less than other men, rather far more, should take the well-known saying of the old Latin comedian Plautus as his own, and deem nothing foreign to himself which pertains to human life. If nowhere else, at least in the range of the authors he reads, he should obey this principle. There is an intellectual bigotry which turns up its nose at what are called the lighter forms of literature, as if they could do nothing for such intellectual superiority. Why should a preacher who can occupy himself with Kuenen and Kant and Kidd waste his time over such books as Birrell's "Obiter Dicta," Dr. John Brown's "Spare Hours," or Dr. Holmes's "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table"? Intellectual bigotry, like all other forms of bigotry, pays the penalty not only in narrowness, but, what is as bad, dryness. How fearfully dry some of our specialists in theological study do become!

Dr. Holmes has contributed three different forms of literature to our American development. He was first of all the poet, and his poetry now fills three volumes. Then he became the essayist, and in the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," "The Professor at the Breakfast Table," "The Poet of the Breakfast Table," "Over the Teacups," we have his most characteristic and most fascinating work. He has also tried novel-writing in his "Elsie Venner" and "A Mortal Antipathy," but it is not by his ventures in this line that he will live. If to all these we add such volumes as the "Pages from an Old Volume of Life," "Our Hundred Days in Europe," containing his lectures and addresses, his observations of the mother country, etc., we find thirteen volumes as the outcome of his literary career. This, too, in addition to his long labors as professor of anatomy. There is a lesson

\* "Pages from an Old Volume of Life," pp. 361-401.

for preachers as well as everybody else in the record of so busy and so fruitful a life.

It will hardly be questioned that the preacher should know something of what his people, and especially his young people, are reading. It would be well for him if he strolled occasionally into the village library and asked the librarian a few questions on this point. The answer might encourage him, quite possibly it would startle him, at any rate it would set him thinking. One trouble with preachers is that they and their hearers are moving in two different worlds of thought. While he is discussing some high theme in divinity, on which he has expended much laborious reading and honest thought, they are wondering why their good minister is not handling such and such a question, started by the essayist in *The Atlantic Monthly*, or in such a poem as everybody is discussing. The sermon on the Incarnation would take more hold if now and again the pastor treated a problem in living, which some popular writer had set the parish generally to thinking about. At any rate it is true that no American, or for that matter English, author is more read in our country than Dr. Holmes. His books have all the taking quality which finds readers so easily and holds them so strongly. Be it his poetry or his essays or his lectures or his biographies, it is easy to see why they find their way everywhere and meet with so hearty a welcome. Or if any one wonders why he has such popularity, let him read the introduction to "A Mortal Antipathy," in which the author takes the reader into his confidence regarding his inner life in authorship, and he will wonder no longer.

I have used the word "popularity" as characteristic of Dr. Holmes's writing, all of it. It is "popular" in the best sense of that term, by reason of its bright and winning style, by reason also of its grasp on the human heart. Did not his career as poet begin with "Old Ironsides"? What American schoolboy has not felt his heart throb as he read

"Ay, tear her tattered ensign down,"

and his next poem, "The Last Leaf," did not the good and great Abraham Lincoln know it by heart as he knew the American people by heart also? And so also in the "Autocrat" and "Professor at the Breakfast Table" with their congeners, when he made a boarding-house the scene of those fascinating talks, he at once touched the key of popularity as not Dan Chaucer in his "Canterbury Pilgrimage" or Boccaccio in his famous garden could do. Therefore our preachers would do well to follow the teaching of this gifted writer, which the young and old too are taking in. They are live books—very live, as the successive editions show. And above all, Dr. Holmes is a teacher. Some of his teachings you will not approve. Very well. Take care that they do not supplant your own. Some of them you will think

admirable. Again very well, say so on fitting occasions. Take him into your orthodox pulpit. His father was a good old-fashioned New England minister, and by right of heredity the son might be heard occasionally.

The preacher will also find his account in reading Dr. Holmes, because he will find what are some of the objections raised against Evangelical beliefs, objections which are rife and which, indeed, have gained a wider currency by means of the Autocrat's trenchant thrusts. *Fus est ab hoste doceri.* 'Tis an old maxim in a dead language. But the old Roman knew its value and the modern preacher would do well not to overlook or forget it. If he will go carefully through the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" and its three congeners (they are all delightful reading) he will see just what objections are raised in modern thought to doctrines deemed fundamental. He will see just how they must be met. He will soon learn that they cannot be met by simply quoting scripture texts, by an appeal to inspired authority. He will see that immense harm has been done by some language the old theologians, and even good Dr. Watts, have used. Such points the sharp wit of Dr. Holmes never lets slip. For example, he quotes Jonathan Edwards as saying "As innocent as children seem to be to us, yet, if they are not of Christ, they are not so in God's sight, but are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers," etc.; and then asks "Is it possible that Edwards read the text mothers love so well "Suffer little vipers to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God?" Now, it is hardly necessary to say that this does not dispose of a true doctrine of native depravity, but it does warn all preachers against the folly of exposing true doctrines to misconceptions or distortion, by their unwarranted and unscriptural way of presenting them. The careful reader of Dr. Holmes will find, very solemn lessons in this direction. His well-known poem, "The Deacon's Masterpiece, or the Wonderful One-Hoss Shay"—a more delicious bit of humor never found its way into verse,—may not be thought to have any theological bearings. But when I have heard or read occasionally some logical discussions of those awful themes, where the finite merges in the infinite, I have recalled this "logical story," with its closing lines:

"End of the wonderful one-hoss shay.

Logic is logic. That's all I say."

Preachers, moreover, do well to read books which are suggestive of themes for pulpit treatment or of points to be made in their teaching on religious or moral themes. Bible-study is indeed the great fountain for such supply. The Bible is the most human as well as the most divine of books. But how many books a preacher may read and get no hint of anything for homiletic use. How many he may read and incur the danger of becoming too scholastic, not to say dry and

juiceless in his treatment of his pulpit themes. It is good occasionally to find books which handle themes people are thinking seriously about, and handle them in a fresh and vitalizing way. It is not a very bold venture to say that Dr. Holmes, the essayist, can furnish much valuable matter for homiletic treatment. Here I can make my point best by illustration. I quote almost at random:

"I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving. To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor."\*

There! does not that suggest a sermon on "Drifting, considered Morally and Religiously"? If we give a few moments' thought to the matter, we shall see how much there is in current morals and religion which no word so well describes as "drifting," and which is full of spiritual peril.

"A man who is willing to take another's opinion has to exercise his judgment in the choice of whom to follow, which is often as nice a matter as to judge of things for one's self. On the whole, I had rather judge men's minds by comparing their thoughts with my own, than judge of thoughts by knowing who utter them. I must do one or the other. It does not follow, of course, that I may not recognize another man's thoughts as broader and deeper than my own, but that does not necessarily change my opinion, otherwise this would be at the mercy of every superior mind that held a different one."†

Here again we come upon a very timely suggested theme—choosing our leaders in religious thought. Isn't this election going on every day? Are there no party cries and hot partizanship to make it somewhat dangerous? Has universal suffrage any more dangerous side than when it exists, as it surely does exist, in the moral and religious sphere? If there are no stuffed ballot-boxes, are not the young, at least sometimes, in danger of bribery by their passions or ambitions in choosing their leaders?

One more illustration must suffice:

"The truth is, if the Devil could only appear in church by attorney, and make the best statement that the facts would bear him out in doing on behalf of his special virtues (what we commonly call vices), the influence of good teachers would be much greater than it is. For the arguments by which the Devil prevails are precisely the ones that the Devil-queller most rarely answers. The way to argue down a vice is not to tell lies about it—to say it has no attractions, when everybody knows it has—but rather to let it make out its case just as it certainly will in the moment of temptation, and then meet it with the weapons furnished by the divine armory."‡

I should despair of any minister who would not handle such a text as 2 Cor. xi. 14 more tellingly after reading the whole passage from which the extract above is taken.

Dr. Holmes is a master in the "art of putting things." As such

\* "Autocrat," etc., p. 93.

† *Ibid.*, p. 15.

‡ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

he may well be looked into by preachers to whom this art is so essential. What I refer to is the gift of saying things so that the meaning is taken in at a glance, and then stays by the reader or hearer. Doubtless the conversational tone which makes up so much the charm of his books lent itself readily to this art. But it is, in fact, this conversational method, which might profitably usurp much of the oratorical in sermons. The crisp sentences are so facile in getting and holding our interest, yet they come in easy flow, like the best talk, as they are. Any one who ever heard that master of American eloquence, Wendell Phillips, must have been struck with his conversational tone. Even when he uttered his tremendous philippics, how quiet his manner! Was it art with him or nature? Art or nature, it was a gift which any preacher who ever lived might envy. It will help any one toward acquiring the art of conversational teaching to study Dr. Holmes's four books, "The Autocrat," "The Professor," "The Poet at the Breakfast-Table," and "Over the Teacups." For he is teaching all the while—teaching so that all readers are apt to become his pupils. And even when he says things from which we dissent sharply we cannot help admiring the lucid, easy, telling way he has of doing it. How apt are his illustrations! From how many realms he gathers them. Let any preacher turn to the "Autocrat," and see what use Dr. Holmes makes of the guinea-worm in inculcating a moral truth; he will see also what I mean by commending Dr. Holmes as a sort of model popular instructor—not by any means always for what he teaches, but for his inimitable way of doing it.

I have from time to time in *THE HOMILETIC REVIEW* called the attention of preachers to a class of books, which for them, as for other professional men, subserve a high use, as mental rest. These are books of prose as well as poetry which tranquillize us in the fever and fret of life. Not religious books as such, but books which take us out of ourselves, clean away from all subjects or surroundings which remind us of hard work and the stiff, knotty problems of practical daily life. Such books as "Boswell's Johnson," and Christopher North's "Noctes Ambrosianæ," and Charles Lamb's "Essays of Elia." To these must be added Dr. Holmes's books, both prose and poetry. A book, to be truly restful, ought to have a fund of rich humor, a racy and captivating style, touches of true and varied sentiment, flashes of insight, freedom from hard logic, dealings with human life on its lighter side. The method which Dr. Holmes adopted in the making of his "Autocrat" is admirably fitted to secure these ends, and we find an exhaustless fund of interest in following the fortunes of the characters he has brought around the breakfast-table or over the teacups.