

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

Tennyson.

BY THE BISHOP OF DURHAM.

THE centenary of Alfred Tennyson's birth draws near. August 6, 1809, was the day which gave him to England and her literature; a great gift it was to both. There has never lived an Englishman who more ardently and with a deeper insight loved his country. And in the mighty roll of her sons of genius and letters Tennyson's place of glory—we may say so without misgiving—is as fully assured as that of Wordsworth or of Milton. I am not now speaking of his precise place among English poets, which must inevitably, for a long while at least, be debatable. But I am claiming for him, without hesitation, a seat secure and dignified upon the broad summit of our Parnassus.

Let us briefly recall the dates of his life and work. His father, like Cowper's, was a well-born parochial clergyman, George Clayton Tennyson, Rector of Somersby among the Lincolnshire wolds, a man of marked and striking individuality. Alfred was third of seven brothers, of whom two besides, Frederick and Charles (the Charles Turner of later life), have left a poetical fame behind them less splendid but not less genuine than his. Frederick, still a child, prompted the yet smaller Alfred to his first essays at verse—inscribed upon a slate; and solemnly announced that "he could write." Charles, when Alfred was fifteen, joined him in producing *Poems by Two Brothers*; the eager venture of young mental ambition; reprinted in 1893 as a literary curiosity, whose interest lies not least in its shewing, with an abundant facility of phrase and versification, scarcely one example of strong originality, nor any promise whatever of the intensely distinct style which both brothers, pre-eminently Alfred, were so soon to develop. But only three years later, in 1829, Alfred, at Cambridge, won the annual medal for an English poem; it was on the theme of Timbuctoo. And here, in perhaps a crude but certainly splendid first display,

the style which was to be his own to the last, and of which he was surely, in the strictest sense (along with his brilliant brothers), the originator, rises upon us. A great command of rhythm, a studied felicity of phrase, in which no word is used without subtle choice and purpose, and a rich magnificence of mental and imaginative colour, combine to make a notable prize poem. A story is told about *Timbuctoo* which indicates the surprise with which its novelty of form and accent struck the academic world. The University prize-poem of tradition had been always faithful to the couplet verse of Dryden and Pope, and usually to the style of their time; Heber's *Palestine* (1803) was a noble example of that type. But *Timbuctoo* was a rhymeless performance, and the diction resembled nothing in the past. The first adjudicator who read the manuscript could make little of it, and sent it on to his colleagues with the brief note, "*Look at this!*" The words, meant to express an unfavourable surprise, were mistaken for admiration, and procured, by the prestige of the critic, the benevolent approval of his brethren.

We may easily conceive the pleasure and the hope with which Alfred's brilliant circle of Cambridge friends, Hallam, Trench, Milnes, Alford, Lushington, Merivale, would welcome the award. Hallam wrote, about that date, that Tennyson was bidding fair to be "the greatest poet of his generation, perhaps of his century."

Next year, 1830, after leaving Cambridge—without a degree, called home by his father's death—he published his first small volume. It showed ample proof that *Timbuctoo* was no isolated effort, but a bright flower from a garden already rich with even rarer beauties. Among those early poems are *Love and Death*; *Circumstance*; *Mariana in the Moated Grange*; and the *Ode to Memory*. A second volume appeared in 1832, much richer still in the tokens of a new and splendid power. It contained, to name only its chief contents, *The Lady of Shalott*, that mysteriously perfect idyll of pure romance; *The Miller's Daughter*; *Ænone*; *The Palace of Art*; *The May Queen*; *The Lotos Eaters*; *A Dream of Fair Women*; and the group

of short patriotic poems, including, " *You ask me why, though ill at ease.*" Thus at twenty-three he was achieving work not only of admirable rhythm and melody, but expressive of a depth, strength, and tenderness both of reflection and emotion scarcely surpassed even in his maturest years. It was a fulness even more precocious than Wordsworth's, while destined to issue in a continuous mastery, maintained to the end of life in a degree not permitted to Wordsworth, who wrote very little of the first excellence during the last third of his long course.

Ten years later, in 1842, he published again, and now the wealth was ampler still. Now appeared *Morte d'Arthur*; *The Gardener's Daughter*, a poem presenting passages of unsurpassed beauty; *Ulysses*; *Locksley Hall*; *The Two Voices*; *The Day Dream*; *St. Agnes*; *The Lord of Burleigh*; *The Vision of Sin*; and that most perfect little poem which closes the collection, as purely poetical, to my mind, as anything of its sort ever written, *The Poet's Song*—his walk out of the little town into the open summer fields where "waves of shadow went over the wheat," and his melody, sung "in a lonely place," about the better days to come.

Another five years, and Tennyson's first sustained work was published, the brilliant, beautiful, and curiously prophetic *Princess*, picturing in magnificent ideal the ladies' college of the future, while inculcating all the while the truest chivalry on man's part and the glory, on woman's, of the ministry of wife and mother. The interspersed songs are all pure gems; most precious among them is that musical meditation, "*Tears, idle tears,*" whose loving sadness lies almost too deep for the drops of which it sings.

The year 1850 Mr. Palgrave calls Tennyson's *annus mirabilis*. It brought him the Laureateship, vacant by Wordsworth's death, and it ushered *In Memoriam* into the world. Long before that year indeed the great Elegy had been begun. I possess a letter, written to me by Archbishop Trench, in 1870, in answer to an enquiry about the antecedents of the metre of *In Memoriam*, which had been used by the Archbishop in the

year 1841. He replied that he "had seen at that date five or six of the poems of *In Memoriam*, circulating in manuscript." The whole unique poem of poems bears the impress of long meditation and deliberate art, only a meditation and an art everywhere vivified and inspired by the *afflatus* which is not of themselves but comes wonderfully down upon them from the secret place of genius.

That same year saw the poet's happy marriage.

In 1852 Tennyson produced the Ode on the great Duke's funeral, the loftiest and truest of "laureate" poems. In the next year he settled at Farringford, in the Isle of Wight, and there lived continuously till 1870, when, partly for greater privacy, he acquired an alternative summer retreat, Aldworth, near Haslemere in Surrey.

Maud was published in 1855, in the Crimean time, to which it alludes at the close. Here much more than in any previous poem he broke away from established form and, with great but justified boldness, essayed the difficult and subtle task of speaking on morals, affections, manners, politics, in short, on human life, through the personality of a half-demented hero. A certain calculated exaggeration thus runs through the poem, full of startling and suggestive effect; and the songs in which the lover's passion and sorrows are expressed rise with a sort of consistency to the utmost height of a beauty at once bold and tender. The *Maud* volume contained several shorter poems, *The Brook* among them, an eclogue, if the word may be allowed, of the sweetest beauty.

In 1859 appeared the first magnificent instalment of the *Idylls of the King*. It seems but yesterday to me, though it is fifty years ago, when that green volume (it stands somewhat faded now upon the shelf) first met my eyes. A more complete contrast in form and idea to *Maud* could not be conceived. And the measured dignity of these magnified and almost epic *Idylls* (surely the pleasant, modest word had never before been used of anything so great) did not captivate all the critics. I recall a review in the *Illustrated London News* which poured something

like scorn on the poet whose artificiality and *lack of heart*, so it was said, made such a contrast to Scott. But the *Idylls* won their way to almost universal admiration practically at once, and Enid, Elaine, and Guinevere took, and have kept, a place in English literature akin to that of the heroines of Shakespeare, while the faultless yet nobly human Arthur was brought from the little-known pages of Mallory into a literary and moral sunlight which cannot fade. And all the scenes and all the characters meanwhile convey an uplifting message to modern civilized life, in a form where heroic narrative and ethical allegory are wonderfully harmonized.

Before me lie some fine stanzas in praise of the *Idylls*, written on their first appearance by a dear hand long turned to dust. The last lines record how—

“ We thank the mighty Master of all song,
The Master of all music, that there lives
One poet more, here in this busy throng,
Singing across the hubbub of our lives.”

That was the thought of numberless hearts. Those were good days, *meliores anni*, when we had amongst us a poet true and great enough to be a prophet, and of art and power enough to lay hold upon a nation's mind and sensibly to elevate its ideals.

The *Idylls* grew in the course of twenty-six years (1859 to 1885) from four to twelve. The later poems are all powerful—one of them, *The Passing of Arthur*, magnificent, as it welds into unity the glorious *Morte d'Arthur* of 1842 and the severer yet all the grander work of the thirty years older artist—almost like an amalgam of *Paradise Lost* with *Paradise Regained*. But the first four poems retain, to my mind however, their bright pre-eminence.

Five years later, in 1864, came *Enoch Arden*, again an extended and elevated idyll, much more of the properly “idyllic” type than the Arthurian poems. It is surely one of the greatest and most satisfying of Tennyson's works. I remember buying the just-published book one midsummer morning, from Macmillan's

window at Cambridge, before a long day's walk with a friend along the Cam to Ely; and I feel again my surprise at first and then my deep and abiding admiration over the story, so moving, so perfectly told, with all the strength and tenderness of one who, being a consummate artist, was also a true man, intimately conversant with working life. Little did they know either the "commons" or their poet who criticized the last line as "a contribution by the undertaker." It speaks the very heart of the simplicity and truth of the people.

Mingled with the later *Idylls* as to date came the three great dramas, *Queen Mary* (1875), *Harold* (1877), *Becket* (1884). I know nothing of the conditions requisite for the success of a drama upon the stage, and can only speak of these works as poems in dramatic form. As such they are all great, with a fine depth and dignity of human interest. To students of the Reformation who are also its sons *Queen Mary* must always have a value of its own. The poet shows himself the genuine historical and theological thinker, and he deliberately casts his vote for the now often discredited and sometimes vilified Reformers, and not least for Cranmer. Tennyson has written few passages more vivid and more moving than the scenes where the two old wives, sheltering in the church, discuss the martyrdom and where the cultivated eyewitness describes it.

Five volumes of poems were issued between 1880 and 1890. Some of them contained additional *Idylls of the King*, and several were other extended pieces included; but none of these, I think, is of Tennyson's highest order. This later work is often shadowed by a sadder, a less hopeful, view of life and the world than appears in the first *Idylls*, not to speak of *Locksley Hall*, and *In Memoriam*, and *The Princess*, and many of the noble early lyrics. Here Tennyson faithfully reflected the mind of his age, which saw rudely broken many of the buoyant anticipations of human well-being (not always under the sanction of Christian faith) which ran so high, particularly at the time of the Exhibition of 1851. But Tennyson, even where he writes least cheerfully, and even where he speaks out the awful per-

plexities which, except under the light of Christ, suggest only too urgently a pessimistic scepticism, is never merely sceptical. I cannot conceal my regret that, being so Christian as he was, he did not go yet further in a poet's confession of the fulness of the faith. But conversations of his latter days, recorded or privately reported, may well assure us that, whatever clouds surrounded him, he stood upon the Rock of our redemption. He confessed Christ with beautiful simplicity in the colloquy in the flower-garden where he said that the Lord was to him what the sun was to the sunflower. In talk one day with a friend of my own he discoursed upon phases of religious theory, and said, "As for me, I believe that the Supreme Being is a Person, and that His name is Jehovah."

Three or four lyrics in those later books may well be placed with his most perfect work. I would specify *Early Spring*, in the *Tiresias* volume (1885), verses of a delicacy and beauty almost beyond analysis; and, in that of 1890 (*Ænone*, etc.), *The Silent Voices*, though the thought leaves us longing for the Sun; and the magnificent and pregnant lines, *God and the Universe*, a song of faith which must have brought help to many a bewildered mind; and lastly, *Crossing the Bar*, that perfect final cadence to a long life of poetic labour. It is beautiful and strong in form to the highest degree, and it is the living utterance of a soul passing at last to the transition on which it had long mused, conscious of a boundless mystery but also of an eternal Friend.

It was in 1884 that the Queen made him a baron, an honour, I think, without precedent where the recipient was only and solely a poet.

Lord Tennyson died October 6, 1892, and was buried, amidst signs of truly national mourning, in Westminster Abbey. A fine statue has been placed within recent years near the queenly Minster of his own Lincoln. His works are a memorial—certainly as to the best of them; and a very large proportion of his poems are of his best—more lasting than bronze. They are as secure of permanence as anything literary can be, unless

man is to alter into another creature, lost in a decadent civilization.

All lovers of the Poet will be grateful for his accomplished son's complete edition of the Poems annotated with recorded or remembered remarks and explanations of the Author's own.

Tennyson had upon the whole a career, almost from the first, of success and approbation. Wordsworth early and generously recognized his promise. I have heard, on trustworthy second-hand information, of a long evening's conversation in Trinity College, Cambridge, about 1833, in which the late Master, Thompson, took part as a young bachelor of arts. William Wordsworth, then staying with his brother Christopher at the Lodge, was the honoured guest that evening of a junior literary circle, and the talk turned upon the poets, such talk that the company was surprised to find that one o'clock at night had struck when they thought it was eleven. Crabbe had lately died, and Wordsworth honoured Tennyson by discussing him as an acknowledged poet to be mentioned along with Crabbe: "Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Tennyson, gentlemen, are complements, somewhat as bread and butter!" The words might have sounded like satire, but the context showed that they only indicated Wordsworth's feeling for the florid beauty of the new poet's recent work contrasted with the homely and severe force of the older man. Yet abundant criticism, hard and prejudiced, was often mingled with the stream of praise, and Tennyson had the good sense to attend to it, studying his own defects with the serious resolve of a man who, like Wordsworth before him, saw in his genius a vocation, a summons to a life-work which must be well done. And grandly well done it was. It is the fashion in some quarters now to minimize his eminence, to patronize him, to say that he was no great thinker, to affirm that his style is but a mastery of "prettinesses"; or again that with the *Idylls* he fell from his old vocation, ceasing to be the free-hearted prophetic singer, and changed into the "courtier"! "What will not men affirm?"

Securus judicat orbis terrarum. I for one believe that not more than five or six names at the very most are to be placed above Tennyson's in our ample and glorious roll of poets. Whatever his precise stature, he walks on the highest levels of our literature.

It is a happiness to me in my latter days to find an always fuller pleasure in Tennyson, while recalling, among other sweet first memories of life, the magic charm of his earlier poems, read musically to the listening child by voices well-beloved, "now silent as the grass that tufts their grave."

There was a time—it was in 1866—when I, a young form-master at Marlborough, was for some weeks Tennyson's near neighbour. His son Hallam, now Lord Tennyson, then entered the school, and both parents came with him, staying with their old friend the Head Master, George Bradley. Tennyson was often in and out between the House and the School, sometimes sitting in our Common Room. The cloak, the broad sombrero hat, the tall figure and the dark, noble face, came to be familiar sights. One evening I was Mr. Bradley's guest at dinner, with other masters and a few boys of the Sixth. In the drawing-room Tennyson offered to read, and *Guinivere* was respectfully asked for. He read it through, very simply, very grandly, in a voice deep and singularly musical, stopping now and then to explain in a word or two some allusion to nature or to history.

Once again, about a year later, I caught sight of him. Near my native Dorchester lies Maiden Castle, a vast and elaborate earthwork, possibly if not probably pre-Roman. Walking back as if from a visit to it there passed me one evening in the broad fields, at a little distance, two persons; one was Tennyson, the other, as I learnt afterwards, Mr. F. T. Palgrave. Very naturally I conceived the hope that the mighty and mysterious fortress would be found to have inspired a poem, or at least a passage. But no sequel of that visit ever appeared in verse.

Let me close with a simple "epitaph" which I wrote when

Tennyson was buried. It was prompted mainly by the thought of the noble patriotism of the man :

“ Here slumbers our last poet, pure and great ;
 With genuine tears let England bless his name,
 Not only that his glory swell'd her state,
 But that he loved her with a votary's flame.”



Foreign Missions and Christian Unity.¹

By ROBERT E. SPEER, M.A.

I WISH to speak of three points. First, the considerations which call us to Christian unity on the foreign field, and which indicate its possibility ; second, the kind and degree of unity to which these considerations call us ; and, third, the measure in which this unity has been attained.

I. First, with reference to the considerations which indicate that Christian unity on the foreign mission-field is both desirable and necessary, I would suggest five.

In the first place, the magnitude, the difficulties, and the urgency of the work demand the most fruitful and effective use of all our resources for the missionary task. We have to evangelize a thousand millions of our fellow-creatures—that is, to carry spiritual truth, the most difficult of all truth to carry, to two-thirds of the human race—and not only to persuade men to embrace this truth, but to place their characters under the transforming influence of the Lord of this truth. We have to do this not in any one land or in any uniform set of conditions or in any one language. It has to be done under very trying climatic conditions—conditions that break down the health of many strong men and women ; it has to be done in many scores of languages, which have to be expanded in order to express this truth, and against difficulties beyond the reach of our

¹ An address delivered before the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, at Philadelphia, in January, 1909.