

The Place of English in the Theological Curriculum.

THE recently accepted regulations for non-collegiate men seeking an entrance into our ministry include the study of English language and literature. One wonders that for so long it has been omitted. Probably in the near future the force of circumstances will compel a drastic revision of our ideas of ministerial training—the present interest in the matter seems to foreshadow it—and it requires no gift of prophecy to see that when the time comes, the claims of English will prove irresistible. Even our colleges will have to find larger room for it.

There are, all would admit, two fundamental qualifications for standing in a pulpit as an accredited and efficient minister. First, the possession of a living message born of experience, and then surely some ability to articulate that message for the help of others. Which of these is the more important it would be difficult to say, but happily the question is purely academic, for in the actual work the two are inseparable. Without the message the sermon is wind—hot or cold, yet still wind—but also unless it is meditated in such a way as to reach and find the hearers it is but vain beating of the air. Lord Charnwood says of Abraham Lincoln that he had the rare gift of being able “to take with him the minds of very many very ordinary men.” That is, he could not only think but also persuade. And if a minister of the gospel is a minister first he is a pleader afterwards, and for pleading some knowledge of and facility in language is required.

But is not all this everywhere assumed? Why labour the obvious? Because there is some justification for thinking that the assumption goes too far.

When a man appears before one of our Boards, seeking admission to the ministry, efforts naturally are made to see that he has the root of the matter in him. He is tested fairly thoroughly to discover the reality of his experience, and the substance of his message. Little chance would he stand if it were felt that he failed in this essential. Yet, in spite of that, he is given a course of intensive training lasting over a period of five or six years, all with the view of helping him

to a yet closer grip and clearer vision of the message he already has. In theory, at least, it is not the purpose of our colleges to change a man's essential message, rather they encourage him to be himself to the end—though it is understood that he needs help in order to elucidate it further, to test it in the light of church history and wider life, and so win a greater definiteness and certainty.

But ought not a man's power of utterance to be equally trained? No man of course would gain entrance into a college who had not in some way demonstrated that he had the gift of speech—but once in college, he finds this more or less taken for granted. He may do a little English for his Matriculation examination, but fortunate is he if he finds an interest in the art of expression, running head and neck with his interest in Theology and Biblical Science. These become important while the other sinks for the time into the background. If so, is it not one of the weak points in our ministerial equipment?

Of course it can be argued that a man's message, if vital, will inevitably find its mode of expression. Give a man something to say, and he will say it. That is true enough, and no view of the matter would be correct which failed to begin there. But equally true it is that it is difficult to make bricks without straw. I mean there is another side to the truth—as every author and journalist to-day recognizes. Even when a man has his message clear he is still dependent on his vocabulary, and vocabulary can be enlarged, style can become more vivid, and speech not merely correct but telling. After all, it is not merely a matter of finding a way of saying what one has to say, but *the way*, which, while it does justice to one's thought, is at the same time easiest and pleasantest for those who hear. The proclamation of the Gospel is not just the uttering of truth. It is the declaration of the word in such a way as may win for it a ready acceptance and make it easy of assimilation.

The missionary in a foreign country is a good example in this respect. He is always close to the problem of language, and he knows well that a knowledge of the thought forms, and even the prejudices of the people amongst whom he labours is as important as a clear vision of his Gospel: that is why it is becoming increasingly common for missionaries to soak in the literature of their adopted land. Many of them make it a life-long study, realizing that there is nothing so characteristically national as a national literature. And that is so of our own. Where better are reflected the peculiarities of English life, the guiding lines of English thought and development in the years, the atmosphere of our country than

in the great treasury of English literature? To get in the pulpit the spirit and tone of our master-writers, is for every public man a decided gain, and in these days when it is demanded that a minister should be a man of his people and of his age as well as one who holds eternal verities, we cannot leave too much to natural endowment, or rather, shall we say, we cannot despise the additional advantage of training. Great preachers, like Maclaren and Spurgeon, have well known how to appreciate this rich portion of our heritage. Lesser men require to profit by it even more.

In the past undoubtedly there has been a certain amount of prejudice against giving the study of language too prominent a place in ministerial preparation. Part of the prejudice was undoubtedly due to the way it was conceived. Too often it has been no more than a study of grammatical rules and exceptions (for which English is famous), and then a cramming up of dates of births, deaths, and so forth. Stopford Brooke's Primer is admirable, but what a pity to stop where Brooke leaves off! The study of the subject matter itself—the reading and examination of the great works—was too often regarded as a mere holiday task, something over and above the necessary thing, an extra if we were keen enough to do it. The beauty of the landscape was missed often, because of the absurd preoccupation with the telegraph poles. However, all this is changing. The teachers of English themselves are changing it. Witness, for example, the books of Quiller Couch. Let any one see what he makes of English language and literature, and then say whether there is not here a subject which is worthy of deliberately life-long study on the part of all who could endeavour to persuade and uplift his fellows.

The second reason why the subject has been looked at askance is the fear of filling the pulpits of our land with literary *dilettanti*, happier in turning a pretty phrase to one in wrestling with saving truth. The essay style of preaching is rightly condemned. In fact, our people have a horror of it. But the only way surely to avoid that evil is not by discouraging men from the study of their medium, but by deepening their experience and desire. Where passion fails no language whether pretty or otherwise, will be living. But when passion surges up in its great forceful waves it will be all the more effective if in the prepared mind it finds fitting forms to use. Let it be quite understood that the secret of true speech is not beautiful language but *fitting* language. The art is not in saying the thing prettily but in saying it aptly. But that can never be done—save by the born genius, who is very rare—without prolonged study of the material language offers and the ways in which it has been used.

We do not of course claim that study, however well-directed or long-continued, can make a genius. In this also one star differeth from another in glory. But we maintain that any man's ability can be greatly enhanced by guidance and practice, and that sermons which often are felt to be deadly dull, could be lifted on to the plane of effectiveness, were there behind them a real acquaintance with such principles as modern English masters expound, and in them the ringing cadences of our great English prose. A Paderewski find it necessary to practise many hours a day. There is a corresponding drill necessary to him who aspires to be an effective speaker. Such drill we think should begin in college, that the student being aware of its value may cultivate it through the years.

A. DAKIN.

To the Honourable Commissioners of the War Office. Please to inform me of Christopher Watkin, son of Henry Watkin, a Protestant of the Denomination of General Baptists, born at Castle Donington in the county of Leicester the 3rd day of March 1777, attested by Thos. Pickering, pastor, Jno. Bakewell, elder, to the General Baptist Society in Castle Donington aforesaid. N.B. Christopher Watkin went with the Duke of York the first time into Holland in the 15th regiment of Light Dragoons in the Colonel's company, and has not been heard of since. Please to direct for Henry Watkin at Mr. Jno. Bakewell's grocery, Castle Donington, Leicestershire. Henry Watkin.

Fifteenth Drags. A man by the name of Watkin was in the Colonel's Troop of this Regt. in 1794 and was killed on the Continent. The Register for the above Period is with the Navy Baggage at Dartford so that it is not known whether his Christian name was, or was not "Chrystopher." G. Anson L'Cor. R.L.D.

If you have occasion to apply here again upon this business, be sure to let this letter accompany your application.

[Postmarks. Loughborough 109. Nov. 14, 1800.]