

## A Few Reflections on My Presidential Experiences.

MY chief feelings are those of thankfulness and hope. Our statistics of the last two years are cheering, giving evidence of life and activity. I believe we are at the dawn of a new day. Our people are wistfully desirous of better things, conscious of past failures, and resolved to arrest the drift which has continued too long. Nothing has impressed me more than the amount of steady, faithful work which is prosecuted by that company of dependable folk in every church who are the comfort of the pastor and the salt of the whole society. It is these people who say that winter is passing and that times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord are at hand.

It is significant that work amongst the young is given a large place, and it branches out in various directions. The fine premises I have seen in small towns and villages, the growing adoption of the graded school, the progress of movements like those of the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, the Young Worshippers' League, afford abundant hope. In some places it has been painful to see how we have apparently lost our young people, but the endeavours referred to are welcome signs of the consciousness of the Church that we must put all our strength into the winning of our boys and girls. In some churches a weekly children's Bible class, conducted by the minister, is a conspicuous feature. I wish that it were more general. In my own pastoral experience, as I look back, there was no work which so amply paid for the toil spent.

I have gained a new sense of the great value to our churches of our general superintendents. The office is new, and of course it has its critics. Improvements will be made as experience grows, but I am convinced that the system has come to stay, whatever future adjustments may be made. I have not heard a suggestion that it is an office we can dispense with. Indeed, its critics have always repudiated that. Further, I have witnessed the close and friendly relations between superintendents and ministers and churches. Many grateful testimonies have been given to me. This is the more striking because, in another denomination a similar system has been strongly assailed. It has been said plainly that moderators tend to act as bishops, and betray some of the vices of sacerdotalism. That may be an unjust charge. I will, however, fearlessly assert that the good

will of our church to the system of superintendents is due largely to the fact that our brethren have eschewed all that the term bishop generally carries for us. The superintendent differs *toto caelo* from the bishop. He is not endowed with authority over the churches and pastors in his area. He does not make and ordain ministers. He is in no wise the man whose official act alone completes church membership. Our superintendents are brothers amongst our ministers, the Greathearts who bring strength, comfort, and sympathy as well as wise counsel to the churches and their leaders. They have done us immense service and they will hold a large place in our denominational life.

May I point out certain weaknesses and dangers which the year has revealed to me? (1) I am painfully impressed with the great brevity of our pastorates. We have swung to an evil extreme. What is it? The average ministry is not much over three years. A man does not stay long enough to get rooted in the trust and affection of his flock. Young people have no minister they think of as "my minister." They have so many as they grow into manhood. Hence lack of continuity in teaching and in personal influence. That is the cause of much drifting away. It is bad for church and minister. A deacon said to me recently, "We want a man who will settle." The general restlessness of the time contributes to this evil. But other causes are at work. I fear that the time limit—good enough in many ways—does sometimes work harm. It affords so easy a chance for a disgruntled faction of a church to eject a minister, or failing that to kill all prospect of any useful service from him. Sometimes a minister is prone to regard a church as a mere halting-place on the road to a better. Sometimes any difficulty is too soon viewed as a divine indication to seek another charge. Patience, tact, and grace would overcome the obstacle and enrich the conqueror. We lose much by impatience. Some churches are so notorious for constant changes that new residents in the town give them a wide berth.

(2) Some need the reminder, "Attend to the ministry you have received in the Lord; see that you fulfil it." There is a danger of allowing the supreme object of the ministry to be obscured by a number of quite secondary objects. I mean this. We are not entrusted with the care of souls in order to become zealous propagandists of new views of the Bible, nor to be perpetual scolds, railing against the evil days and the brethren who cannot rest in old traditional theories. We are not to be caterers for our young people, a sort of universal provider of recreation and amusement. This is no ruthless condemnation of all such things, but a reminder that these where used must be strictly treated as means to our first and all absorbing aim. So again we

ministers are not called to be social reformers. We shall be all that if we put the first things first. Of course, I freely allow that the gospel has its social implications about which a faithful preacher cannot be silent. Outside the pulpit we ought to be as citizens, warm supporters of practical movements for the amelioration of the common lot of the less fortunate. But the advocacy of party political programmes from the pulpit is harmful, and that on three simple grounds: (a) The problems call for sound knowledge, and not one in a hundred of us possesses it. Some of our hearers could better become our teachers. (b) Our congregations are more sharply divided than they were forty years ago, and such advocacy may produce a sad breach in a church and cripple its work for a decade. (c) Our task is a bigger one. We are character-builders, and as we make Christian men and women, we are doing the thing men most need and the work Jesus Christ expects. And we shall indirectly and powerfully promote the lesser ends too. John Wesley did more for the social redemption of England in the eighteenth century than any social reformers. He inspired some of them, he created the spiritual forces which rendered the reforms possible, and he produced the men and women who could profitably use them. This is simply a plea for keeping before our eyes the supreme end of the ministry. We are tempted to let it get edged out of sight by the multifarious rôles in which some people expect us to appear.

(3) We all need a higher and more heroic strain in our ideals of service. A few years back, when the Empire needed men it had them in abundance, and when men were required for adventure and perilous enterprise there were competitors for the honour of standing in the tight place. How is it in the church? There is a tendency to look after the soft job—a church not too large, with a congregation made by men who went before us, with only a few organizations, which will give ample time for the gratification of intellectual tastes. We desire a good set of deacons who can shoulder the burden of the business of the church and a well-officered Sunday school. How many on leaving college aspire to be pioneers, building on no man's foundation, but having to create (humanly speaking) everything—congregation, church, workers, and material resources? There are great historic buildings derelict. There ought to be more men ready to attempt the heroic hard. But Epaphroditus is a somewhat *rara avis*. "For the work of Christ he came nigh unto death playing the gambler with his life." There is a similar lack in the church. They say we are poorer. Probably we have fewer rich people. But wealth is being more evenly distributed. Few respond to the call for gifts or service. We have become too fond of comfort and unwilling

to take responsibility. Why, I am sometimes asked to send students at unreasonably early hours on Sunday because in a church of hundreds no one can give week-end hospitalities. It is only symptomatic of a slack sense of responsibility. The whole conception of life is changed. Our fathers lived in smaller houses, kept fewer servants, took briefer holidays, indulged in no week-ends, spent far less on pleasure and entertainment. They were restrained in these matters on principle. They lived simpler lives that they might give more to Christ and His cause.

What is the Christian ideal of life and service amongst us? It is not high enough.

These are a few reflections which have come to me as I have travelled north, south, east, and west. I wish to apply all that I have said last to myself as much as to anyone.

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## The Place and Use of Scripture in Christian Experience.\*

THE limits within which I propose to deal with this subject will best be indicated by stating briefly the circumstances of origin of my paper.

In the course of a discussion which we had a few months ago, on the work of the minister as defender of the faith, one of our members remarked that he really felt the need of a previous discussion as to the essential contents of the faith which we had to defend. He went on to explain that in particular we seemed to be at cross purposes respecting the Scriptures, some making a particular view of their inspiration and authority practically an article of the Christian faith, while others could not assent to this.

It is the purpose of this paper to take up his suggestion. It will be, in intention at least, an eirenicon. As far as possible it will seek to avoid controversial matter, and to map out a common standing-ground which both parties can occupy. Please observe that my title avoids divisive terms like "inspiration" or "revelation." It does so deliberately. It is no part of my object to combat the traditional theory of inspiration. I have not the impertinence to wish, or in a twenty minutes' address to attempt, to dislodge revered brethren from an attitude to the

\* The substance of a Paper read at a recent meeting of a Baptist Ministers' Fraternal Union.