

## ART. IV.—ST. PAUL'S ADDRESS TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS.

## A DEVOTIONAL STUDY FOR MINISTERS.

THE scene depicted in this chapter must have been one of thrilling interest to those who witnessed it. Never to their last hour could those elders have forgotten the emotion of the speaker, and never could the impression which his words produced have faded from their memories.

The natural features of the scene remain unchanged. There is still the sandy shore on which the little party stood. The blue waters of the Mediterranean still stretch themselves in the distance. The rugged chain of mountains over which the Ephesian elders walked from their home still raise their crests to heaven. But the unchanged aspect of natural features presents a striking contrast to the marvellous change which, in other respects, arrests our thoughts.

On that day throngs of people crowded the streets of Miletus, and perhaps filled the benches of its vast theatre, while the little band of Christians almost avoided observation as they gathered round their friend on the shore. Now that theatre lies in ruins, as does the life and civilization of which it was a type; while the few words spoken by a careworn traveller to a handful of strangers from Ephesus still live and speak, and never to a larger audience than that which hears and ponders them to-day.

Many of the expressions in this passage are embedded in the ordinal of the Church of England. But all the words are inscribed in that Book which has survived the vicissitudes of sixteen centuries, and is making conquests to-day such as have never been witnessed in the whole course of its history.

I do not dwell upon the whole passage, but on those of its words which describe the nature of the minister's call, the character of the minister's work, and some traits of the minister's character.

I. *The Minister's Call.*—In verse 24 the Apostle tells us that he received his ministry from the Lord Jesus; and in verse 28 he reminds the elders that the Holy Ghost had made them overseers over that flock, which is the Church of God purchased by the Lord's blood. It is beside my purpose here to enter on matters of controversy. The Apostle's words take us back behind all matters of this kind. They remind us that the Christian ministry, if it is what it professes to be, is received from the Lord. Ministers of the Church of England have received their ordination from her bishops and presbyters. They hold their different positions in virtue of that ordination.

But here is something higher. They are ministers of Christ. It was from the Holy Ghost that they received their commission at first, and thence, too, they derive their authority to-day. Ordination in our Church pre-supposes a Divine call which has been heard before the day of ordination, and a Divine authority which has been bestowed before the chief minister speaks the solemn words, "Take thou authority." It is authority given by the Lord, which gives the consciousness of power, and contains the promise of success. All ministers need the strength which comes from a recollection that they are sent of God. They need it in conflict with the pride, the ambition, the indolence, the selfishness in themselves, which often threatens to mar their ministry. They need it in ministering to souls which are clouded with doubt or overwhelmed with the consciousness of sin. They need it to face the various forms of evil which threaten the flock committed to their charge. They need it when they stand face to face with a multitude of fellow-sinners; or when in the stillness of the chamber of death they endeavour to point a dying brother or sister to the only hope of everlasting life which can sustain his soul. Whatever may be our view of the Christian ministry, surely it is well to recall the fact which admits of no controversy, and which is the source of all ministerial usefulness—that ministers have received their ministry from the Lord Jesus, and that they have been inwardly moved thereto by the Holy Ghost. It is just in proportion as that is true for any minister that he makes full proof of his ministry.

II. There are words in this address which describe *the character of the minister's work*. Take the following words: "Testifying," verses 21, 24; "preaching," verse 25; "declaring," verses 27, 20; "teaching," verse 27; "overseers," verse 28; "watch," verse 31; "feed," verse 28. As we read the list we learn how much the exhortation in our ordinal for presbyters is indebted to this passage. They are called to remember—

To how weighty an office and charge ye are called; that is to say, to be messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord; to teach and reprove, to feed and provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for His children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ for ever.

The words of the Apostle which I have quoted above present seven different characters, whose work and office are used as illustrations of different departments of ministerial work. The characters are these: "A witness," "a herald," "a messenger," "a teacher," "an overseer," "a watchman," and "a shepherd."

The first four figures present different aspects of the ministerial work of preaching.

(a) "*A witness.*" "Testifying." That means that a minister

should have personal experience of that which he relates. The truth which he proclaims must be made his own by personal use, or he fails to be a witness. The Apostle expresses the thought conveyed by this word more explicitly in 2 Cor. iv. 13: "We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written I believed, and therefore have I spoken: we also believe, and therefore speak." The great teachers of the Church in the Old and New Testament spoke because they believed. Hence comes one of the great charms of the Bible. It is at the same time a voice from heaven and a voice from earth. Those who speak are not mere reporters. Their report kindles their own affections, their message shakes their own souls, their doctrine or their psalm rises and falls, sinks and swells with the heaving of their own emotions; and the life and reality of feeling is the evidence of the life and reality of faith. This is for evermore the power of the ministry and the life of the Church. The reason for faith is the evidence which is offered for the things to be believed; but to quicken conviction into life, there is need of the current of conviction which already lives. It lives in individual hearts. The corporate faith of the Church has its own office and effect. Its ordinances, its assemblies, its creeds, its sacraments, constitute the sphere of influence and the channel of action for personal individual faith. If this is languid or absent, then we descend to the mere repetition of formularies, to ceremonies and performances, and creeds and authorities. The Word and the Sacraments may be there, but the life of the Word and Sacraments is not.<sup>1</sup> Views of God seen by the eye of personal conviction are essential to testimony. That man who simply adopts for himself what others have seen is at the mercy of changing scenes and changing opinions.

Patient, prayerful, humble, independent search will give views which will be the peculiar possession of him who goes forth to testify of that which he has seen of the word of life. And this testimony must be complete. Not only the truth and nothing but the truth, but the whole truth. No craven fear of man, no conscious disregard of some portion of that truth must be allowed to mar the completeness of testimony. Every minister must see to it that he brings no injury to others by the deliberate incompleteness of his testimony, or by a mutilation which is the result of culpable ignorance.

(b) The next figure is that of a *herald*, who appears with a proclamation. We are thus reminded of the authority with

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<sup>1</sup> For many of the thoughts and expressions in the passage above I am indebted to Adolphe Monod's farewell addresses, and to an ordination sermon by Canon Bernard.

which ministers preach. There must not be the mere repetition of the formula, "In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," but the deliberate conviction that they carry God's proclamation, and that whether men will hear or will refuse to hear, they are bound to make it. The business is not theirs, it is the King's. This figure also reminds us that it must be in clear and ringing tones that the proclamation is given out; ministers must take pains with language, arrangement, and every other accessory, so that whatever the effect may be on their hearers, there shall be no room for doubt as to their meaning. If their first thought be the importance of their proclamation and the authority they bear to make it, they will be saved from that nervous self-consciousness, or that feeble meandering through a subject without aim or point or object, which makes the proclamation from some heralds' lips nothing but the sweet music of pretty sentences, or the ineffectual attempt to achieve a literary work of art.

(c) There is a third word—"declaring"—which the Apostle uses here in speaking of this part of a minister's work. It is used in conjunction with "teaching" in verse 20. Bengel says that the former refers to public (*δημοσιᾶ*), while the latter describes more private (*κατ' οἴκου*), teaching. The idea conveyed by the term is that of accuracy. A messenger who distorts his message, or mutilates it by carelessness, may inflict much harm. He must learn accurately first, and deliver accurately afterwards.

(d) The word "teaching" points to the pains which he must take to get his message understood and received. He is interested not only in the King who sends him, but in the subjects to whom he is sent. It is very humbling to discover from time to time how utterly one has failed in teaching. I mean in teaching so that people understand. Partly from their indolence in hearing, partly from their ignorance of the message, partly, also, from pre-supposing a knowledge which does not exist, there is a lamentable ignorance of spiritual subjects in the minds of a vast number who are regular attendants in our Churches. A minister's work is not finished when he has made his proclamation. He must teach, and that *κατ' οἴκου* either individually or in small classes, so that people learn and understand the message which he has to convey. He must be as St. Paul, in writing to his son, Timothy, himself a minister of the Church at Ephesus, describes an *ἐπισκόπος*, *διδακτικός*, "apt to teach."

The next figure, an "overseer," *ἐπίσκοπος*, introduces us to another department of ministerial work.

Strange to say this passage is one of the two passages in our ordinal for the Epistle in the consecration of Bishops. I say

"strange" because those whom the Apostle says had been made *ἐπισκόποι* are also called here *πρεσβύτεροι*, so that as far as this passage is concerned the word does not point to the office which we now recognise as that of chief minister. Here, at any rate, it points rather to a department of work entrusted to the hands of all Presbyters. What is that work? We gain very little information from any description in Scripture, for in 1 Tim. 3 the Apostle, in describing an *ἐπίσκοπος*, speaks almost exclusively of his personal character, and hardly at all about his work. We must go rather to the idea conveyed by the word, and that is the idea of "inspecting" or "overseeing." I take it that as applied to Christian ministers the work of overseeing is both general and particular. It is "general" in the sense of overseeing, or considering the condition of their parishes, as a whole—their special wants, their special sins, their special temptations. It implies further a looking into all the departments of work which are connected with the Church in their parishes. I do not mean that they should display any want of confidence in those who are their fellow-labourers, lay or clerical; but that they should not allow portions of the work to pass away from their personal oversight. In a large parish, where there is much organization, the responsibility entailed thereby for supervision is great indeed. But besides this general inspection, unquestionably the word directs us to the particular oversight of individual souls. Those who have been confirmed under our teaching, our communicants, members of our congregation, special cases of sickness, or trouble, or interest, demand oversight. What a vast variety starts up before us as we cast our thoughts over the parish where we labour. The ideal of a parish Presbyter is one who does take the oversight of each individual in his parish. This is possible in many parishes. In some it is quite beyond the power of one man, and yet, though that sometimes be the case, the aim of those who minister in over-populated parishes should be, if they are true *ἐπισκόποι*, to watch over individual cases as far as possible with prayer, with friendly advice, or caution, or remonstrance, as necessity arises.

The next figure which demands our attention is that of a *watchman*, v. 13. "Watch." This figure is closely allied with the former, for the Apostle adds immediately afterwards as an incentive and an example, "remembering that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears." But there is a special thought connected with the word, and that is "danger." In the words immediately preceding he indicates the danger. "Grievous wolves," "false teachers," and those even from among themselves. The subject of false teaching is both wide and delicate. But the Apostle indicates danger from it to the flock of Christ. It is not always easy to

draw the line between what may be tolerated as a difference of opinion and what ought to be denounced as a dangerous heresy. Watching, however, implies that when teaching plainly contrary to the Gospel of Christ attacks their flocks, it is the duty of ministers to take notice of it—to point out its danger, and where it is inconsistent with Christ's teaching. Not that I consider that it is their duty to preach frequently controversial sermons, or to train their people in those asperities which tend to break up the Church which ought to be united; but clearly, if they are true to the direction given here they must not shut their eyes and cry to their people "Peace!" when there is no peace. The danger from false teaching in the Christian Church is constantly shifting its ground, and requires the wakeful eye of a watchman who watches for souls to detect and expose it.

In the last figure, that of a "*shepherd*," v. 28, the Apostle seems to indicate the true prophylactic against the danger of false teaching, and that is "feeding the Church of God." There are many parts in a shepherd's work, but the chief of all is "feeding" his flock. Hence, out of the eleven times the word is used in the New Testament, it is translated "feed" in seven of them. There is a passage in our ordinal in which this very thought is suggested. "See that you never cease your labour until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty, to bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge unto that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God, and to that ripeness and perfectness of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you either for error in religion or for viciousness of life." A flock well fed in the pastures of God's Word is a flock well protected against danger from false teaching. The importance of this part of our work is apparent, whether we consider the value of the flock—purchased with His own blood—the food convenient for them, or the danger arising from our neglect. "Preach the Word," is the Apostolic injunction to an Ephesian minister. There are strong temptations in the present day to attempt to feed the flock with other food. There is, however, a richness in the pastures here which will not be found elsewhere; and ministers will most certainly do injury to their flocks if they listen to the temptation to feed them with more exciting food in place of the wholesome doctrine of God's Word. It is well, no doubt, that ministers should have some knowledge of some of the chief heresies of the day; but it is far more important that they make themselves better acquainted with Holy Scripture. There is a temptation to think that because leisure is very limited, therefore it is impossible to exercise independent search and study of God's Word; and that the conclusions of those whose opportunities for study are far wider than those which come in the way of most parish

priests in town parishes, must be simply accepted. There is, I think, some danger in that temptation of losing the strength of independent thought, and so of missing a great deal of what that Word might speak through each individual minister to others.

Let the habit of many Nonconformist ministers be a warning to ministers of the Church of England. They have unquestionably lost a great deal of the spiritual hold which they had upon the people by substituting politics for the Word of God in their pulpits. Souls need to be fed, and not merely minds to be instructed or passions to be inflamed. There is only one food suitable.

III. I invite attention to some of those words and phrases in which the spirit which ministerial work demands is portrayed. I select four expressions, which set before us the graces of "humility," "tenderness," "thoroughness," and "unselfishness."

1. *Humility*.—In verse 19 the Apostle says that he served the Lord with all humility. The grace described by this word (*ταπεινωφροσύνη*) is essentially a Christian grace. The very word itself is a birth of the Gospel. No Greek writer employed it before the Christian era, nor apart from the influence of Christian writers after. It is true, as Trench points out in his interesting essay on the word, that Aristotle unconsciously described the grace with greater accuracy than Chrysostom. The former says that to think humbly of one's self, where that humble estimate is the true one, is true *σωφροσύνη*. Then if this be so, seeing that the humble estimate of one's self is the true one according to the light shed upon ourselves by the Spirit of God and by the perfect example of Christ, it is a grace which ought to adorn every man. Chrysostom, on the contrary, says that it is the making ourselves small when we are really great—"*ὅταν τις μέγας ᾖ, ἐαυτὸν ταπεινοῖ.*" This, however, is little short of bringing in pride under the guise of humility. It is something more than mere modesty. Our Lord Himself claimed it, though He was without sin. And it is in the sense which His use of the word opens to us that the Apostle seems to use it here. Our Lord uses it clearly, not as acknowledging His sinfulness, which would not be true, but as expressing His dependence as man on His Father. In His human nature He is the pattern of all humility, of all creaturely dependence. His human life was a constant living on the fulness of His Father's love. So with His servant in the passage before us. He submitted his judgment to the guidance of his Lord's Spirit. He humbly endured the difficulties and dangers which service to his Lord entailed. And this should be the mind of every minister. A habit of standing, as it were, before God, of receiving directions from Him, of accepting without question

His guidance and command is a matter of prime importance. It saves from many mistakes and many disappointments, while it arms with a force which will be sought in vain elsewhere. It saves from all dependence on gifts, apart from grace, from overrating the force of human opposition, or of human favour and support, from murmuring at the difficulties of any post, and from dissatisfaction with any position; while it imparts the force of a quiet dependence on Him in whose service ministers are engaged, and by whose aid alone they are enabled to do or to bear as He may appoint. Humility in this sense is exercised towards God.

2. There is another grace which shines out in the Apostle in the word which follows "tears," and this grace is exercised towards men. Twice in this passage (verses 19 and 31) does the Apostle mention his "tears." What tenderness of heart is exhibited in those tears! How deeply he felt the opposition of the Jews, not merely because his work was hindered thereby, but because he recognised in them the injury inflicted on souls. What a picture for our imitation is that which he draws in verse 31. Listen to the counsel and entreaty given to one individual after another, backed by the forcible argument of tears. He evidently cared for those souls. He must have believed in their danger. He must have longed for their salvation. Is not that the spirit whose cultivation is needed now? Dr. Dale, in his book on "The New and Old Evangelicalism," asks some questions which are useful to others than those to whom they were first addressed. He questions whether there is the same intense yearning for souls among modern Congregationalists as was exhibited in the leaders of the evangelical movement a hundred years ago. Is there, the clergy of the Church of England may ask, the same intense desire for the salvation of souls among themselves? Is there not a danger, in these days of multiplied organizations, of tenderness of feelings being blunted by incessant contact with mechanical details? It is worth while to listen to the Apostle's tears, that hearts may be melted into a tenderer concern for the souls committed to the care of ministers, and in doing so it must be remembered that the Apostle's tears were the outflow of the Apostle's faith. Perhaps want of tenderness comes from a failure to realise the depth of danger which awaits every soul that has not yet sought and found the Lord. Men cannot care much for souls if they do not intensely believe in the reality of future punishment.

3. The Apostle shows not only that his feeling was tender but that that tenderness was real, for he was *thorough* in his work. Take these four expressions: "I kept nothing back," verse 20; "Publicly and from house to house," verse 20; "Night and day," verse 31; "Each one," verse 31.

Right through his work he was thorough. No pains were spared to make himself acquainted with the message he had to deliver. Nothing would induce him to keep anything back. Publicly and privately, by day and by night, he sought the salvation of each individual. "This one thing I do," might be said of his public ministry, as he said it of his private spiritual life. I have touched above on the thoroughness of his work. Here we contemplate the thoroughness of the spirit which underlay that work and which inspired it. It was a spirit of thorough conscientiousness. He tells us that he *exercised himself* to have a conscience void of offence. In writing to Timothy he exhorted him to *study* to present himself before God as a workman that needeth not to be ashamed. The expression which he uses of himself, and which he addresses to Timothy, implies that difficulty has to be overcome. Men are so strongly influenced by their immediate outward surroundings that they fail sometimes to recognise their invisible but ever-present Master. They strive, perhaps, to satisfy the judgment of their fellow-men, but they are tempted to neglect the judgment of their King. In all parts of their work, however—the most obscure and private, as well as the most public, the Apostle's example presses upon ministers a spirit of conscientious integrity—a spirit which leads them to give the very best they can to every detail of their work.

4. There is the splendid example of entire *unselfishness*. Money and liberty and life itself were placed at the disposal of Him whom Paul served. He said (verse 24): "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy." (Verse 33): "I have coveted no man's silver or gold or apparel; yea, ye yourselves know that these hands have ministered unto my necessities and to them that are with me."

From the moment that he found the Saviour on that memorable day as he was journeying to Damascus Christ was the centre of his life. "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" was his first question, and his whole life afterwards was spent in translating into act the Lord's answer. Our circumstances are different to those which stood around St. Paul, but the spirit which animated him must be ours as well.

He disclaimed covetousness. Judas is an awful example of its consistency with the highest ministerial gifts. It is not the fault of any Ecclesiastical system, but the natural principle of a corrupt and selfish heart. It allies itself to every system of Protestant dissent with an influence as habitual and destructive as in any Ecclesiastical Establishment.

Our Church in each of her ordination services pointedly

alludes to it. She warns her Deacons from the Word of God that they be not "greedy of filthy lucre." She exhibits to her Priests the awful picture of an "hireling," at the same time instructing them how they ought to forsake and set aside (as much as they may) all worldly cares and studies. She deems it necessary to give to her highest order of ministers this solemn charge: "Be to the flock of Christ a shepherd, not a wolf; feed them, devour them not."

Covetousness, we must remember, is very distinct from frugality, which is a real duty. The careless and improvident are quite as injurious to the cause of Christ as the covetous. But covetousness is one form of selfishness. It is the keeping back of that which we have promised to give. It is making self, not Christ, the centre of our lives. The selfish man is he who considers his own worldly advancement and ease before the interests of Christ. It is a temptation to which all are exposed, and when the minister of Christ yields to it it is fraught with consequences of grave evil both to himself and to the flock to which he ministers. There appears, however, to be a growing desire in these days to exhibit to the world an example of unselfish devotion to the Master's work. The opportunities both at home and abroad for extending the kingdom of Christ were never greater than they are to-day. It would indeed be sad if, through selfish regard for ease and worldly advancement, any minister refused to incur the difficulty entailed by seizing those opportunities. The clergy are not asked to part with their liberty or to risk their lives, but they are asked to be unselfishly laborious and heartily consecrated. They must not shirk the cross, but bear the marks of the Lord they serve.

Dean Howson, in his work on the character of St. Paul, quotes and uses the following :

An ancient legend says that the Evil One once appeared to a saint who was praying, radiant in royal robes and crowned with a jewelled diadem, and said : "I am Christ. I am descending on the earth, and I desired first to manifest myself to thee." The saint kept silence, and looked, and then said : "I will not believe that Christ is come, save with the marks of the wounds of the cross," and the false apparition vanished. The application is this : Christ comes not in pride of intellect or reputation for ability. These are the glittering robes in which Satan is now arraying. Many spirits are abroad ; more are issuing from the pit. The credentials which they display are the precious gifts of mind, beauty, richness, depth, originality. Christian, look hard at them, with the saint in silence, and then ask for *the print of the nails.*

W. ELIOT.

