

Dr. Fairbairn—a History and a Moral.

THIS "Life of Dr. Fairbairn" will be widely read among Nonconformists, for Dr. Fairbairn was heart and soul—was to the very essence of his being—a Nonconformist. It was not, as some may imagine, that being a Presbyterian in Scotland he naturally, when he came to England, found himself a Nonconformist. He never was a Presbyterian. He was as much a Nonconformist in Scotland as he was in England. And the "Life" will appeal to the Nonconformist; it will appeal to his spirit and his ideals.

But I hope the "Life" will be even more widely read among English Churchmen. Yet if they read it, will they understand it? Much against my will, I am obliged to answer, No. And if I am asked, Why? I reply, Before you can understand, you must have knowledge, and before you can have adequate knowledge, you must have at least a measure of sympathy. The knowledge to which I refer is not such as can be obtained from studying a man or a cause or a society from the outside. It can only be acquired by living with people, within their circle, in their mental, religious, political atmosphere, and that for a considerable period of time—a qualification which a very small number of English clergymen possess with regard to Nonconformity. Then, besides being heart and soul a Nonconformist, Dr. Fairbairn was essentially a Scotchman; and, at any rate so far as religion is concerned, it is exceedingly difficult for the average Englishman, and especially the average English Churchman, to understand the typical Scotch mind in religion.

Why would I have the "Life" widely read by Churchmen? For this reason: because I believe that to a very striking degree it reveals certain ideals of ministry, of the Christian ministry, which it would be to the immense advantage of the average English clergyman to cultivate. This is my chief, I might even say my sole, object in commending a very careful study of it to my brother clergy.

Dr. Fairbairn was a man of great and many parts. He was a real scholar—the late Lord Acton once told Viscount Bryce that he considered him to be the most learned man in Oxford; he was an exceptionally hard thinker; he was a philosophical theologian of really very considerable weight; he was, of course, a very strong politician—though here, at any rate by outsiders, his position was far more often misunderstood than it was correctly estimated; but, beyond and above all these activities, Dr. Fairbairn was first and foremost a trainer of men for the pastoral calling. He was himself “a pastor who was also a teacher.” No man had a higher ideal of the pastoral function, and no man ever worked more strenuously to make this ideal a reality. After having for many years discharged the duties of a pastor, he accepted a call to train men to discharge pastoral duties as efficiently as possible. For the rest of his life—though amid many other and various activities—he practically devoted himself to one object: how he could improve, and increase the efficiency of, the Nonconformist ministry. Of how extremely successful he was in this object the testimony is abundant.

No man ever entered the ministry with fewer external advantages. A child of poor parents, he left school at the age of ten. For the next four years he was an errand-boy; then for four years he worked with his hands as a stone-cutter's apprentice. At the age of nineteen he entered the University of Edinburgh. How he supported himself there for three years would be a mystery to anyone but a Scotchman. The funds for this were partly supplied by the Church to which he belonged—that of the “Evangelical Union”; they were also obtained by his own exertions, by preaching engagements on Sundays, and by taking “temporary pastorates” during the vacations. Contemporaneously with his studies at the University, it should be added, Fairbairn was attending theological classes at the Evangelical Union Hall in Glasgow. At the end of three years he left the University without taking his degree—possibly from want of funds to pay for it. Three years later—that is, while he was in the midst of the work of his first pastorate—

Fairbairn went as a student to Berlin for twelve months. This one year, in addition to the three years spent between the University of Edinburgh and the Evangelical Union Hall in Glasgow, seems to have been the only period during which he received instruction. For the rest of his education he relied entirely on his own efforts. How strenuous these must have been is proved by the verdict of Lord Acton already quoted. The fact is that with Fairbairn learning and working, assimilation and expression of knowledge, were always going on side by side.

Already in his student days he seems to have highly developed two of the essential qualifications of the efficient pastor. The first of these was really earnest evangelical preaching; the second was an intense love for souls, a devotion to the highest welfare of individuals. On pp. 19 and 20 we have an account of his preaching at this earliest stage of his career from one who was then accustomed to hear him: "His sermons were full of matter and abundant in allusions and illustrations, literary, historical, and poetical, drawn from widely different sources, ancient and modern, that seemed to lift us up into a larger world than we had been living in. . . . Yet he was a thorough evangelist, and revivalist even, in the best sense. He was full of fire, and spoke as one consumed with the one passion of winning souls to Christ and the Christian life. However far afield he might seem discursively to lead us, in, say, the first half of his discourse, it was only that he might with greater effect bring us face to face with Christ, and the issues of life and death bound up in our relations to Him."

Fifteen years after this, when he was minister of St. Paul's Street Church, Aberdeen, he had two congregations to whom he preached two different kinds of sermons. Of his morning congregation and sermons Sir W. Robertson Nicoll writes: "One was struck by the grave, subdued air of the worshippers. Most of them were evidently poor, though decently clad. Not a few had drunk the cup of sorrow. They had found life a

‘sair fecht.’ They needed consolation and strength. They turned to Fairbairn’s pulpit weather-beaten faces, brows furrowed with care. . . . The most beautiful thing, as it appeared to me, in Fairbairn’s character was the way in which he set himself to succour, to uplift, to inspire the flock committed to his care. . . . The preacher knew what his hearers were thinking and needing, and what they had experienced” (pp. 80, 81).

The evening congregation and the evening sermons were both very different from those in the morning. The congregation then was drawn from all over the city, large numbers of members of the University being generally present. The sermons, which were entitled lectures, were upon subjects to which even then Fairbairn had given special study, and upon which later he became a recognized authority. Among other subjects upon which he lectured were the following: “The Conflict of Faith and Doubt”; “The Scientific and Religious Conceptions of the World—need they exclude each other?” “Inspiration and Revelation”; “The Credibility of the New Testament Record”; “The Jesus of History and the Christ of Christianity.”

I lay stress upon this double work of Fairbairn’s to show how he felt he was a debtor, to show that he felt he owed a duty, both to the unlearned and the learned. He carefully considered how he could supply the needs of more than one class of hearers, and by strenuous work he became extraordinarily successful in this double task. He fed the spiritual life of the devout, while he strengthened the faith of many seekers after truth. Unless he had had an intimate knowledge of the mind of both classes, and unless by constant study and strenuous pastoral visitation he had been able to preach from both a full knowledge of theology and an equally full knowledge of human nature, he could never have accomplished what he did. As another instance of the same double capacity I may cite the following: In 1884, when he was Principal of Airedale College, on the outskirts of Bradford, Fairbairn addressed a

letter to the working men of that great manufacturing town, inviting them to a course of "Lectures on Religion." To this the response was so wide that Horton Lane Chapel—one of the largest places of worship in the borough, and situated in its most populous part—was crowded each Sunday evening with a genuine working-class audience to the very doors.

Fairbairn's first regular pastorate was at Bathgate, a little country town half-way between Edinburgh and Glasgow. He went there when he was twenty-two, and remained twelve years. It was during these years that he laid the foundations of his future usefulness and influence. If any young clergyman wishes for convincing proof of the importance of the use he makes of the early years of his ministerial life, let him read and ponder over the twenty-eight pages which describe Fairbairn's work at Bathgate. So far as externals are concerned, few places could be less attractive. The place itself had no natural beauty, and the congregation consisted of small farmers, miners, quarrymen, and a few small tradesmen. Yet many of these men "were acute if not very well informed theologians," who "provided him with a healthy and stimulating atmosphere." In one of his earliest letters from Bathgate he speaks of being "as busy as possible: visiting, writing, and preaching are the orders of the day." "It was there," his biographer says, "he set himself to lay the foundations of all his future work. . . . He ordered his time with Spartan strictness and economy. . . . It was his custom to rise at 5.30 a.m., to work until 8.30, and then, after breakfast, until his dinner-hour at 2 p.m. The afternoons were generally spent in visiting his flock, and the evenings in classes and meetings. It may be said that there is nothing unusual in this. I am not so sure. I have long had, and still have, a somewhat extensive knowledge of the younger clergy. How many of them study six hours a day, or even three, before their midday meal? How many books which require 'study' do they, on an average, read in twelve months? How many will take the trouble to acquire a foreign language in order to increase their field of knowledge? How many of them realize

that the days may come when, from the sheer force of circumstances, their possible hours of study must be curtailed? I would go further and ask, How many incumbents in the Church of England encourage their young assistants to continue to be serious students? We read that Fairbairn "allowed nothing to interfere with his morning studies," and that "he must have spent a large part of his slender income before he was married in buying books." The way in which the majority of the younger clergy economize in books is certainly not to their advantage. Within eleven years of his entering the ministry Fairbairn's library consisted of nearly 2,000 volumes, many of them in foreign languages.

There is one episode in Fairbairn's life at Bathgate which, from its effects upon his later career, cannot be passed over. His theology was at first undoubtedly narrow. I have not space here to describe its contents, which are given fully in the "Life." A narrow theology is to any man a dangerous theology; it is especially so a hard student and a hard thinker—though these two qualities are not by any means always combined in the same person. After Fairbairn had been five years in the ministry, he confessed to a friend that "he had not an inch of ground beneath his feet"; in other words, his faith in what he had hitherto believed and preached had gone. He took a bold step: he resigned his pastorate, and went for a whole year as a student to Berlin. The school of theology there in 1865 was not what it is to-day. The influence of Hegel was still predominant in philosophy, and Fairbairn's own philosophical position showed at least traces of Hegelianism to the last. At that time Dorner was making theology at once more personal and more ethical; also Hengstenberg was then championing a conservative attitude, both with regard to orthodox belief and Biblical criticism. All these men had a strong influence upon Fairbairn, who at the end of twelve months returned to his pastorate with his faith absolutely restored, and with a theology far richer than he had known in earlier days. An epitome of his old faith and his new (on pp. 39-41), given in his own words, is a very

striking example of genuine self-expression. It shows how manfully he had "fought the spectres of the night, and laid them." One or two sentences may be quoted: "Theology was reborn, and with it a new and higher faith. God seemed a nobler and more majestic Being when interpreted through the Son; the Eternal Sonship involved the Eternal Fatherhood, and the old controversy as to their consubstantiality took a new meaning when the Son was conceived to be as necessary to the Deity as the Father. . . . Man, too, was so interpreted as to be invested with fresh majesty as an individual, and as a race he had a unity which made his fall and his redemption at once more possible and more reasonable. . . . Nor could the old narrow notion, which made salvation rather an affair of a future state than of this life, survive in the face of these larger ideas. Redemption concerned both the many and the one, the whole as well as the parts, the unity as much as the units. Man had collectively suffered loss, and collectively he could be saved. Hence his social as well as his personal recovery followed as a matter of course; only the rebuilding of the City of God, which had fallen down, could satisfy Him who had made the citizen, had planned and built the City." Quite apart from our agreement with the doctrines here expressed, we must admit that this is a very striking confession of faith from a young man of twenty-seven years of age. It is no mere acceptance of a conventional creed, but one which has been arrived at as the result of much labour and very earnest thought. It is a striking testimony to the value placed upon Fairbairn's ministry, and to his people's entire trust and confidence in him (even through theological change and restatement), that they kept the pastorate open during the time he was away, and welcomed him warmly on his return.

During the latter part of Fairbairn's ministry at Bathgate he wrote regularly for certain religious journals; he also became an occasional contributor to the *Contemporary Review*. Yet he never allowed his literary work to interfere with his preaching and visiting; on the contrary, he no doubt felt—what many

another minister has felt—that a certain amount of so-called literary work compelled him to make clear the contents of his mind. To put oneself into a position to be freely criticized is an excellent remedy for loose thinking and slipshod composition, two vices all too common among ministers of every branch of the Christian Church.

If Fairbairn stayed twelve years at Bathgate it was not because he was compelled to do so, for while he was there he received several invitations to more important churches. He refused all these until there came a call from Aberdeen. Upon his work there—where he remained five years—I have already touched. It was certainly a wider sphere than Bathgate, and one which offered far more opportunity of exercising the powers which he had cultivated and developed. During these years we find the same devotion both to study and pastoral work. Neither the one nor the other was neglected. But he was now beginning to be known more and more as a man of unusual power, one whose opinion demanded at least the most careful attention. If there was one point about his theological position from this time onwards more striking than any other it was the combination of a very definite evangelical creed—in the best sense of the word evangelical—with a demand that theology should be free, that it should not be confined by either the traditions of the past or by the party shibboleths of the present. The following is an extract from an article he wrote to the *Contemporary Review* in 1876: “It is an evil thing for any Church to fall behind the intellect of a country, or to float out of sympathy with it in its most earnest and religious endeavours to discover whatever of God’s truth Nature or Man, Scripture or Science may reveal. It is a thing no less evil for any Church to swear by the standards of the past, when its faith has been permeated and almost transformed by the thought of the present. . . . The question for the Churches to consider is, whether they are to estrange and drive into unwilling antagonism men who are Christian at heart, but are too conscientious to subscribe a burdensome and oppressive creed, which pledges to

many things they do not and cannot believe, or by a timely removal of the more antiquated and obnoxious portions to draw these men into sympathy with the evangelical thought, and community with the religious life of the nation " (p. 68).

By the time Fairbairn had been some four or five years in Aberdeen, it became evident to his friends that he was desirous of taking up more definitely teaching work, and of making this the chief purpose of his life. He was offered the professorship of Apologetics in the Glasgow Evangelical Union Academy, but this he declined. He applied for the professorship of Moral Philosophy at both the Universities of Aberdeen and St. Andrews, but in each case he was defeated, though his supporters numbered among them such men as Geddes, Milligan, Robertson Smith, Lindsay, Blackie, Max Müller, Muir, Dorner, and Tiele.

In 1877 he was appointed principal of Airedale College, belonging to the Congregationalists, which had just moved into new and much larger buildings at Manningham, a suburb of Bradford. There Fairbairn entered upon what was to be his life's work—the all-round improvement, the raising of not only the ideal, but the actual efficiency, of the Nonconformist ministry. In this he was eminently successful; in fact, so successful that when it was decided to build Mansfield College at Oxford, it was unanimously felt by the leading men among the Congregationalists that he was the one man who should be invited to be its first principal. It is with his work at Airedale and Mansfield that, quite rightly, the greater part of the "Life" is concerned. The ideals he set before both himself and his students at both colleges, as well as the methods he pursued in order to realize these, should be carefully studied by all who have at heart the greater efficiency of ministerial work. Into this period of Fairbairn's life I do not propose to enter, for in writing this article I have had a very definite, if limited, object. In fact, I have no hesitation in saying that what I have so far written may be regarded as a text upon which I now wish to preach a short sermon.

Dr. Fairbairn was a striking example of the combination of the intellectual and the pastoral—a combination by no means common. He had cultivated and so knew both these sides of the work of the ministry as few men have done. It was in the combination of these that lay both his strength and his influence. It is the almost general divorce of them that is the real secret of so much of the terrible ineffectiveness of ministerial life to-day; and to this is also due not only the ineffectiveness of the ministry, but the general weakness of the influence of all the "Churches." Unless this divorce can be healed, this weakness will be actually accentuated in the future. We cannot deny that to-day there is a wide separation in both thought and life between the Universities and the working clergy. The Universities apparently do not understand what the parochial clergy need; at any rate, they do not seem to be at much pains to supply it. On the other hand, the working clergy have little sympathy with the teaching of theology which is to-day being given in the Universities. I think I may speak with some degree of knowledge, for I spent four years at one of the new Universities and then three years at one of the old, graduating in both. I have also, I fancy, kept in somewhat closer touch with both than the majority of the parochial clergy. The help I obtained from either—and I think I made at least an average use of the opportunities of doing this—has not been, so far as my practical work is concerned, very great. But I shall be told that there are the theological colleges, both at the Universities and elsewhere, whose object is to supplement their work. I never passed through one of these, but I have had to try to help a good many young men to become efficient clergymen who have done this.

I believe the chief cause of failure lies here. Very few of the men who are teaching theology either at the Universities or at our theological colleges, have had any long experience of pastoral work. Fairbairn had had at least seventeen years experience of pastoral work in a responsible position before he began to train men for the ministry. I will leave on one side

the professors and lectures on theology at the Universities, and I would ask, How many men are there teaching in the theological colleges belonging to the Church of England who have had anything like that length of pastoral experience? Theology, so far as I can see, is at the Universities regarded rather as an extremely interesting field of study, than as a science which is of enormous, indeed infinite, importance in the art of conduct. The last thing I would be guilty of would be of undervaluing learning. The Church cannot have too learned a ministry. But a knowledge of men is equally important with the knowledge of books. "*Ars artium regimen animarum*," said Gregory the Great, and much to-day may be learnt from his "*Pastoral Rule*." In his seventeen years of pastoral experience, Fairbairn learnt what the ministry needed in order to be helpful to the ordinary man, and he set himself to supply it. It is all very well to say that a man learns this from experience. True, I admit, but I also ask, At what cost? I remember a shrewd old Yorkshire woman's opinion of this. I was at the time senior curate on a large staff. Her view of some of the junior curates was one day forcibly expressed by her saying that she would have no more 'prentice lads practising over her. The chief aims of an ordinary theological college, so far as I have been able to discover them, seem to be two: first, to enable men to pass their ordination examinations, and, secondly, to furnish a devotional atmosphere. Both aims are, I admit, not only excellent, but indispensable; at the same time, by themselves, they are quite insufficient. Before a man is admitted to one of the most responsible of all positions, he should have had some training in the practical discharge of its duties, and that by one who has himself efficiently discharged them. Among these "duties" I should place, first, at least some ability to deal with individuals, whether men, women, or children; and, secondly, the power to put a subject intelligently before a mixed audience, in at least such a way as to obtain their attention. Without these two capabilities the fullest theological knowledge, and, I would venture to add, even personal devoutness and true

spirituality, are sure to be ineffective. A third power which the clergyman should cultivate is an insight into the current thought of the age, a knowledge of what is at the present time interesting the average man. I constantly come across two classes of men in the ministry: the first, and by far the smaller, class consists of learned men who have never been taught to make their learning effective; the second, and much the more numerous, class consists of men so devoid of learning and so generally inefficient that the man or woman of average education is certainly not influenced by them. Yet there was a time when many of the men belonging to both classes might have become efficient clergymen—the time covered by their stay at the University and the theological college and that spent in their first curacy. The men themselves are often greatly to blame, for many of them have done practically no serious study since they were admitted into priest's orders. But had the *influence* under which they passed these years been different, the men might now have been very different.

I only hope this history of the early years of Fairbairn's life may open the eyes of some to see what, with as small advantages as it is possible to imagine, a man who is really in earnest about his work may accomplish; also that it may prove that intellectual and pastoral efficiency must go hand in hand if the Christian ministry is to be a real power for good.

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