

OPERA FORIS.
MATERIALS FOR THE PREACHER.

I.

IN the present series of studies I have agreed to furnish some materials of exposition for the special benefit of the preacher. He is apt to be overlooked in the market place of modern criticism, where the details of historical, grammatical, textual, and literary research are displayed to the technical student with an eagerness and a thoroughness which threaten to crowd out any humble attempt to cater for the man whose business leads him to interpret and apply the Scriptures as freshly as he can. He may be too conscientious to fall back on ready-made homiletic material. He may preserve himself incorruptible and independent. Yet his integrity is not always rewarded, as it should be, by his fellow-workers in Biblical criticism. They repeatedly come across items of exegetical interest in their researches, but sometimes they forget to bring these home and lay them out for the less travelled preacher. This seems a pity, and it has, therefore, been thought that a modest and tentative attempt might be made, in the pages of the EXPOSITOR, to furnish from time to time several texts on which the preacher may spread his tent, or round which there may have collected fresh materials of a suggestive character from the outlying provinces of scholarship and general literature.

Præpara foris opus tuum, says the Hebrew proverb in the Vulgate, *et diligenter exerce agrum tuum : ut postea ædifices domum tuam*. The newer developments of historical science, in the departments of Semitic and early Christian history, offer constant proof of the spoils, minor and significant, which can be conveyed to the interpretation of Scripture from outside fields. These hints, illustrations, and results are the preacher's *opera foris*, his works done outside. He

may not have the leisure or the capacity to secure them always for himself. The complexity of the modern ministry tells against this in many quarters. But he should be able to reckon upon the co-operation of others, whose interests take them occasionally into these outlying provinces, and to receive at their hands the contributions, linguistic, literary, or archæological, which he can employ to build up strongly and tastefully his house of interpretation. The same holds true of modern history, psychology, and literature. These also, when carefully explored, sometimes even when casually surveyed, will have their *opera foris* for the preacher; they teem with suggestions and illustrations which, though apparently remote from his proper business, can be carried home and wrought up skilfully for higher uses. And these higher uses concentrate in the effective presentment of the religious message which the Scriptures contain as a shelter for mankind.

The recognition of this forms quite a remarkable feature of recent Biblical criticism, both on the Continent and in this country. The negative period is closing, and the need of positive religious teaching is being felt and met increasingly. Thus, a new handbook to the New Testament is being published in Tübingen by six scholars (*Handbuch zum Neuen Testament*, J. C. B. Mohr), whose avowed purpose is to combine unprejudiced exposition with a critical popular commentary on the text. This object is steadily kept in view, and the full statement of it is entrusted to the competent hands of Herr Niebergall, who has already shown his interest and capacity in a volume, *Wie predigen wir dem modernen Menschen?* From Niebergall's recent essay in this Handbook we may take the following significant words. "We are heartily grateful to the critical and historical treatment of Scripture in our own day. For all the disquiet into which it has plunged us, for all the pro-

longed toil which it has imposed on us, we could not dispense with it. The misty veil drawn by tradition over the New Testament has indeed been destroyed, but that is all; and in its place we have been enabled to secure a knowledge of the greatness of the New Testament which we would not miss for anything. We come under the impression of a great and sterling spiritual power," whose voice is one, however different are the tones of its utterance through one character and another. Hence, Niebergall proceeds to argue, the religious unity of the New Testament, so far from evaporating the characteristic historical differences of its writers, really enables us to interpret these aright, and at the same time, while doing justice to them, to conserve the salient and vital elements of the revelation which the preacher finds verified in history and experience. For any one who has understood this dominating spirit of the Scriptures, "discrepancies, unauthentic traditions, interpolations, errors of translation," and all the rest of it, drop into their proper place. The notice they attract is out of all proportion to their significance. "Through all differences in the historical narratives and doctrinal representations, we feel we are constantly within the very soul and spirit of this unique Power. Here the synoptic differences disappear, the great figure of Jesus, strong and tender, shines out upon the soul, the Johannine Christ approximates to the synoptic Jesus, and both figures, despite all differences, unite in one great human figure, in the figure of One through whom the power and the grace of God operate. Paul and James blend in one supreme, spiritual power, and even the wild ardour of John's Revelation combines with all the rest to form a brilliant flame of the Spirit. For the critical reader each epistle and writing may retain its characteristic flavour, but far above any trivial adjustment of the letter these mighty spirits all harmonize in one Spirit which becomes

more impressive and unique than ever, the more one is engrossed with it."

This passage brings out the timeless element and the spiritual unity in the Scriptures, which their historical variety only serves to emphasize. The *opera foris* of the preacher may be scattered here and there. From many sides they have to be gathered. But, as Niebergall confesses, for all their variety they run up into a real and religious unity. The interpreter's house can be furnished with them, and it will be all the more habitable as it is constructed wisely and generously out of such materials, ancient and modern.

Such is the design of the following papers : not to do the preacher's work for him, but perhaps to enable him to do his work, now and then, more freshly and easily and effectively. The house is the sermon. If it is to be of any service, it must be his own, and he must build it himself. But he may honestly welcome and adapt some stones which have been quarried from outlying fields of reading and research.

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The verse (Prov. xxiv. 27) itself contains some pregnant suggestions for the preacher :

*Prepare thy work without,
and make it ready for thee in the field ;
and afterwards build thine house.*

The book of Proverbs revolves round the two problems of work and temptation ; sometimes, as here, it is one's work which brings temptations into life. The first of these is impatience. The house is not built by a hot rush ! Preliminary work has to be done ; stones must be quarried, and bricks dug, laboriously, often at a considerable distance from the chosen site. *Outside, in the field* which may lie out of sight of the building's foundation, many of the pre-

parations must be made for the final erection. So with all education. Lessons have to be learned, and fields of study laboured, which at the time seem to have no bearing upon life's real business ; yet eventually it is found that these unromantic pursuits have contributed to the efficiency of character. Similarly with the discipline of the soul. Out-of-the-way experiences are often imposed on people, but the long result, with its accumulation of insight and training of the faculties, will justify their divine connection with the central plan. The true character, like the best work, cannot be hastily improvised. It turns out to depend upon many factors, some of which originally may have seemed to have no very direct bearing on the main issue. This proverb is a reminder that all such apparently meaningless tasks and experiences are to be taken without impatience, in the faith that they will contribute eventually to the building of one's life.

The companion warning is against indolence. After all, a house has to be built ; preparations are meant to end in some positive achievement. *And afterwards build !* The test of the field work is the house, and there is a temptation to be slack in facing this test. In literature, in art, or in character, to create is the object of life ; yet there is a disposition to ignore it. The artist is wise in sketching here and there, getting hints and suggestions as he roams far and wide. But his end is not to wander with a portfolio full of unfinished, dilettante sketches.¹ Similarly, the wide work

¹ The mention of an artist reminds one of two apposite passages, one from the twelfth of Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses, the other from R. L. Stevenson's essay on Fontainebleau. The former runs thus : " I have known artists who may truly be said to have spent their whole lives, or at least the most precious part of their lives, in planning methods of study, without ever beginning ; resolving, however, to put it all in practice at some time or other—when a certain period arrives—when proper conveniences are procured—or when they remove to a certain place better calculated for study," etc. The latter passage begins : " The time comes

of preparation, reading and listening and observing, must not be taken as the be-all and end-all of life. Some practical outcome, in the shape of character and definite service, is the goal of culture and experience. There must be the will to act, to create, to serve. And so the proverb is also a warning against the graceful, nerveless indolence which fritters away its time and powers in dreaming of some great work, and yet, from timidity or fastidiousness or procrastination, hesitates to undertake any practical concern. *Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them* (instead of either forgetting or merely admiring them), *I will liken him to a wise man which built his house.*

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Psalm lxxiii. 15 : *If I had said, I will speak thus ; behold, I had dealt treacherously with the generation of thy children.* (R. V.).

An illustration of wise reticence about one's religious doubts. The psalmist was driven to entertain bitter reflections about God's goodness. He wondered to himself whether it was any use to continue serving God with inward sincerity and outward worship (ver. 13), when piety was so poorly rewarded in the matter of health and success. But he had grace to keep his doubts to himself. He burned his own smoke, and now, looking back on the moral crisis through which he had passed, he is thankful that at least he had not shaken the faith of any one else. He had, indeed, been tempted to parade his doubts. Intellectual superiority prompts some to do so ; a weak craving for sympathy induces others. But what saved the psalmist from this temptation was his fine sense of corporate responsibility. It would

when a man should cease prelusory gymnastics, stand up, put a violence upon his will, and, for better or worse, begin the business of creation. This evil day there is a tendency continually to postpone ; above all with painters. They have made so many studies that it has become a habit. This class of man finds a congenial home in artist villages."

have been a breach of faith to scatter suspicions of God's faithfulness and justice among the other members of the household, poisoning or disturbing their simple trust in His integrity. The perplexed man must remember that he owes a duty of consideration to these people.¹ As a rule earnest prayer to God (ver. 17) and silence before others will avail to steady the disturbed heart. Compare Matthew xviii. 6, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, xxxiii :

Leave thou thy sister, when she prays,
Her early Heaven, her happy views ;
Nor thou with shadowed hint confuse
A life that leads melodious days.

The closing verse of the psalm gives the writer's mature judgment upon the matter. *I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all thy works* (literally, *Thy occupations, Thy business*). What the church needs is the proclamation not of man's doubts but of God's deeds. Positive convictions of a good God are the end which alone justifies any one in speaking to his fellows upon the problem of human faith.

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Isaiah lvi. 8 and 12.

The religious and the secular programmes. A new stratum of prophecy seems to begin at verse 9 ; but even if the juxtaposition of these two verses is due to an editor, it offers a sufficiently remarkable contrast of ideals. The earlier verse is the close of a prophetic fragment anticipating, with generous enthusiasm, the addition of foreign converts to the community of Israel. *The Lord God which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith, Yet will I gather others to him, beside*

¹ This is, of course, very different from the somewhat cynical remark made by Northcote the painter to Godwin when the latter had been trying to unsettle the opinions of a young artist. "Why should you wish to turn him out of one house, till you have provided another for him ? Besides, what do you know of the matter more than he does ? His nonsense is as good as your nonsense, when both are equally in the dark."

those that are gathered to him. This represents the spiritual, disinterested ardour of a church looking forward to ever greater results of its divine mission among men. The best thing to be hoped for is this experience of God gathering in the outcast to His fellowship. That sums up the good time coming; that alone is fitted to kindle enthusiasm and hope among the faithful servants of God and man.

But there is a lower side, even in the contemporary life of the church. The next paragraph describes, in severe terms, the idle and profane lives of those who ought to be Israel's leaders in the religious movement. Their ruling passion is not unselfish missionary ardour, but self-interest. Greedy, lazy, and stupid (verses 10-11), they are intent merely upon what advances their own professional ends. Their motto, as they banquet together, is: *To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.* They too anticipate a good time coming. But it is a future of selfish and material pleasures.

A similar contrast is visible in John x. 16 and xii. 49-52.

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In a recent number of Preuschen's *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1907, 143-161), Wilhelm Wagner has offered an ingenious interpretation of Mark x. 17-22 (= Matt. xix. 16-22, Luke xviii. 18-23), which suggests several things to the preacher. He begins, of course, by taking the version of Mark and Luke as more original than that of Matthew. The anonymous rich man said, not *τί ἀγαθὸν ποιήσω κτλ.*, but *διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ, τί ποιήσω κτλ.* Jesus replied, not *τί με ἐρωτᾷς περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ; εἰς ἔστιν ὁ ἀγαθός,* but *τί με λέγεις ἀγαθόν; οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ εἰς ὁ θεός.* This is generally recognized by most scholars nowadays. But Wagner, after reviewing the various explanations of the difficulty thus created, proceeds to argue that the term *ἀγαθός* should be taken in its familiar

sense of "kindly" or "gracious" (= כַּיִן), as e.g. in Psalm xxv. 8 ("good and upright is the Lord, therefore will he teach sinners the way");¹ xxxiv. 8 ("O taste and see that the Lord is good"), etc. The LXX, it is true, prefers to translate the term in such passages by *χρηστός* ("benignant"), but Philo employs *ἀγαθός* in this sense, and it is noticeable that in the only other place where Jesus uses this adjective in connexion with God, its meaning denotes not moral perfection but gracious disposition. In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt. xx. 1-16), where the character of the owner is meant to adumbrate God's dealings with men, the owner pleads "I am good (*ἀγαθός*)."² Obviously goodness here means a royal graciousness. The point of the parable is that God deals generously, with men; He is good to them, liberal, generous.

Wagner wonders if the passage in Mark's Gospel should not be read in this light.² The inquirer asked a great favour of Jesus ("good teacher"). He wished the Galilean rabbi to be so kind as to solve for him a very serious difficulty. "Pray, be good enough to tell me." But, Wagner continues, it is possible that Jesus felt a certain false deference in the address (compare his reference to the *εὐεργέται*, Luke xxii. 25), as though it suggested the servile attitude adopted by contemporaries to Jewish rabbis (Matt. xxiii. 6 f.) and pagan authorities. These were not the fount of favours or

¹ The point of Christ's reply to the young man would then be, not that God's goodness was revealed in the content of the commandments, but that the entire revelation of the law, the very fact that He had disclosed the way to life eternal, proved His goodness to mankind.

² Wagner's further attempt to show that Justin Martyr read the logion in this sense, is quite unconvincing, however. Justin does quote the passage with the addition of *ὁ ποιῆσας τὰ πάντα τοῦ θεοῦ* (Apol. i. 16). But Psalm cxlv. 9 ("The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all his works") does not occur in the context, and it is arbitrary to suppose, with Wagner, that such an idea as that of the psalmist was in the Christian father's mind. The addition is due to the monotheistic emphasis which dominates the entire passage.

enlightenment to men. To employ such terms loosely was repugnant to him who sought not his own honour, but God's (John v. 41, vii. 11); consequently he checked the inquirer, and made him revise his terms.¹ Hence, in replying, "none is good save God alone," Jesus was not denying his own sinlessness or moral perfection. He was simply reminding the inquirer of God's supreme prerogative of gracious favour as the revealer to men of their duty to Himself and others.

The words would then fall to be read in the light of a saying like that of Psalm cxix. 69 :

*Thou art good, and doest good,
Teach me thy statutes—*

where God's goodness is summed up in His revelation of the law of life to man, as intelligible and attractive. The inquirer in the Gospel learns that God's supreme goodness is now shown in Jesus as the guide of all aspiration and obedience, and that anyone who comes into contact with Him comes under a higher obligation (*follow me*).

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Hebrews x. 29 : *Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the custom of some is.*

The neglect of public worship, at which the writer hints, is due not so much to worldly indifference or to a fear of the risks involved in a church connexion, as to the fascination of some other cult. The danger was that these Christians should regard Christianity as a semi-philosophic or religious sect or phase which could be exhausted and then left behind for something higher. The writer insists that it is not one of the contemporary schools or cults. It is final. Beyond its revelation, nothing higher can be looked for, and the Christian must resist any specious attempt to detach

¹ The suggestion has the powerful support of Wellhausen, who, on Mark x. 18, observes : "ἀγαθός bedeutet weniger sündlos, als gutig." Similarly Dalman : *die Worte Jesu* (pp. 277-278).

him from a close and permanent relationship to the church. Compare Harnack's remark (*History of Dogma*, vol. i. p. 151, note 1): "If we remember how the Greeks and Romans were wont to get themselves initiated into a mystery cult, and took part for a long time in the religious exercises, and then, when they thought they had got the good of it, for the most part or wholly to give up attending it, we shall not wonder that the demand to become a permanent member of a Christian community was opposed by many." This is elaborated in the same writer's *Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums* (1st ed. pp. 312 f., Eng. tr. ii. pp. 50 f.), and Hatch has some apposite remarks upon it in his *Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (pp. 29-30). The historical point of the saying is unmistakable. But modern civilization offers instances of the same tendency to regard the worship and revelation of Jesus as a phase which requires to be supplemented. There are people to-day who, from the same motives of vainglory and untrained curiosity, imagine that they have exhausted Christianity, or that they can secure and appropriate for higher ends its spiritual content. The words of this verse reiterate, as the rest of the Epistle does, the finality of Jesus Christ for men, and the truth that no advance of humanity can afford to dispense with Him.

For God has other words for other worlds,
 But for this world the Word of God is Christ . . .
 Who is there that can say, "My part is done
 In this: now I am ready for a law
 More wide, more perfect for the rest of life?"

Forsake not, do not abandon, your tie with other Christians, the writer pleads. It is a strain, in view of the centrifugal tendencies of the world, to maintain Christian fellowship, but it is a healthy strain, for this effort keeps you in touch with all that is central and satisfying in religion. A movement whose motto is "A greater than Christ" may be imposing and seductive, but it has no future in this world of God and of his Christ.

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