

LESSON XXXVIII.

LECTURE XXXVIII.

THE CONCLUSION : EXCURSUS, APPEALS.

WE have considered, in part, that policy of the pulpit which often urges men to the performance of acts which are not decisive of religious character.

(8) It is frequently asked, however, "What shall we do in place of exhorting awakened men to such acts of apparent self-committal?" A period often comes in the experience of the impenitent inquirer, in which every thing seems to be at a stand-still. He does nothing, and will do nothing, to the purpose. What, then, shall we do to break the syncope of inactive guilt? I answer, Do just that which the Scriptures do to such inquirers, — urge anew the motives to repentance. Men repent in obedience to motives. They act under the sway of moral ideas. Press home, then, those ideas which are the natural inducements to repentance. The idea of God, the idea of immortality, the idea of sin, the idea of penal justice, the idea of the day of judgment, the idea of Christ, the idea of love, the idea of dependence on the Holy Ghost, — these are the great central motive-powers to repentance. They ought to be the staple materials of thought and prayer in a time of revival. Set the whole firmament ablaze with the glow and the heat of these eternal verities. Preach them, talk them, pray about them, sing them,

make them the central thoughts of public and private religious services, till men can see nothing else, and think of nothing else, and till they are convinced that you are thinking of nothing else. Bring the force of sympathy thus to the work of deepening Christian thinking upon those truths, which, in the nature of things, must induce repentance, if any thing does.

(9) Let me illustrate this policy in a single detail. Experience in revivals will teach you that there is an inexhaustible resource of suasion to repentance in the single idea of God. All motive to holy choice centers in, springs from, and returns to, the one thought of God. The human soul has occult affinities for that one idea. Neither time nor sin can ever stifle them. It is surcharged with spiritual cravings which find rest in no other conception than the being of God. Therefore it is, that, in revivals of religion, that preaching is most effective which superlatively exalts God. All preaching that is effective owes its regenerative power ultimately to that one truth.

Surprise has often been expressed, that, in the religious awakenings of the last century in New England, the doctrine of election and kindred truths were so largely treated by the pulpit, and were so effective. Some critics account for the phenomenon by the hypothesis of some peculiarity in the religious temperament of the times. I do not so understand it. Those truths exalted the sovereignty of God; they made God seem overwhelmingly great; they realized God as he is to the souls of men; they brought God near to the quaking conscience. Such preaching ought, by all the laws of mind, to be productive of revivals in any age, whatever be the religious diathesis of the age.

Analyze it briefly in its working. Such preaching

brings the heedless soul into contact with the most electrifying spiritual fact within its knowledge. It realizes to the awakened soul the most stupendous conception of which it is capable. It subjects the convicted soul to the sway of the most intense regenerative truth of which thought is possible. It lays bare the consciousness of sin under the burning eye of infinite and eternal justice. It is to a guilty conscience like the exposure of a diseased eyeball to the glare of a tropical sun at mid-day. It arraigns an obstinate will face to face with the only thing in the universe which is its superior. No other preaching is conceivable, which, in the nature of things, is better fitted to make the condition of an impenitent soul appear to itself intolerable, and to break down the defenses of its will against the love of Christ. Conceive of the descent, headlong and far, which a soul must make in coming down from the empyrean of such ideas to muddle itself with the question of taking an "anxious-seat"!

(10) Again: experience in revivals will teach you that often there is a point in the development of the work of divine grace at which it is expedient that human persuasion should cease. It has done all that it can do. It has tried every thing but silence. Wisdom dictates that now the awakened sinner should be left alone, and for this reason, — that he is *alone with God*.

Always, I think, before conversion takes place, if it occurs in such form as to disclose itself to the consciousness of the sinner, always there is a period, long or brief, of conscious moral solitude. The soul feels itself to be alone in the universe with God. The isolation of the day of judgment is foreshadowed in its vision. A wanderer in infinite spaces, cut adrift from

Before following this course of silence, should you choose to do so, be sure the lost sinner has a clear knowledge of the biblical what and how of Salvation. Failure to do so will leave them with only the leanings of their own sinful hearts, rather than the truth of God's Word, with which to judge the wooing of God's Holy Spirit. - Dr. VBK

the solace of companionship in sin, with no friendly hand to support it, or voice to cheer it, the soul sees only a holy and offended God, whose rights it has outraged, and from whose burning eye it finds no hiding. It is best that this should be so. By this experience a sinner's individuality is intensified to his own consciousness. To break in upon that awful seclusion, to bring a sinner back from "God's silence" into the circle of human sympathies by our devices of "anxious-seats," and inquiry-meetings, and persuasions to self-committal in the sight of multitudes, may be a perilous intrusion. Secret intercessory prayer is infinitely more safe. By our suasions to acts which fall short of God's requirements at that critical period of a sinner's experience, we may furnish him with the very escape which he unconsciously craves from that sense of moral loneliness in the presence of God.

(11) Silence is, therefore, often the best protection a sinner can receive from his spiritual guide against the peril of the social element in a revival. Study narrowly the inner working of a revival, and you will find that often, at a certain stage in its development, men fear nothing else so much as to be alone. They will rush in crowds to a religious meeting for the sake of the social sympathy with which it surrounds them. As men in an earthquake will huddle together for the sake of escape from dying alone, so awakened men in a revival will often crowd an inquiry-meeting. They will seek thus just what the sons of Belial in the community, who are disturbed in conscience by the revival, seek in a carousal. Any thing is welcome, if it drowns God's voice in the soul's silence. Therefore I say, at such a juncture it is safer to take the risk of silence. Do nothing more, leave the sinner to himself; drive him, if need be, into solitude with God.

I have been much impressed, in reading the autobiography of Rev. Dr. Finney, with the fact that some of the most remarkable conversions which he records occurred instantly when he took himself out of the way. The result was perfectly philosophical. When man's voice was dumb, nothing was left to the inquiring soul but God's silence, and to that it must succumb. The principle here, which Dr. Finney seems to have come upon occasionally, I would lift into rank as one of the elemental principles for which large place should be given in every revival of great power and of long continuance. There may be peril in it, but not so great peril as that of continuing and exalting the protection which an awakened conscience often finds in sympathetic excitements.

(12) In the same line of thought I remark that the popular curiosity about numbers in a revival is a misfortune. It is too often morbid. Sometimes it is a device of temptation. Never count the numbers of those who rise for prayers. Do not dignify thus that indeterminate act. The good sense of an eminent evangelist was notably evinced on one occasion, when he was asked how many rose for prayer last night, and he replied, "I never count." Do not be solicitous to know how many attend an inquiry-meeting. By skillful manipulation of an audience you can secure the attendance of hundreds as easily as that of dozens at such a gathering. Yet as evidence of conversions, or the prospect of them, such attendance may have no significance. Use an inquiry-meeting as you would use a Bible-class. Make it the means of religious instruction, not a test of religious awakening, still less a means of augmenting religious excitement. Above all, never trumpet these things as tokens of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

(13) We degrade the work of the Holy Spirit if we exaggerate a sinner's consciousness in our assumption of the working of divine grace within him. If we use as evidences of that work experiences which he can attribute to no such origin, we may do him an irreparable injury. We may give him degrading notions of God's work. He may fancy that it consists in suasion to petty and indecisive duties. That which he believes of himself he is likely also to believe of others.

Hence arises the theory that a revival is nothing different from other sympathetic ebullitions; that you can always have a revival if you desire it, and can induce sufficient numbers to combine in the persistent use of the right measures to evoke it. Certain revivalists make a most damaging concession when they admit that a revival of religion depends on the magnetism of numbers. Once sink the popular theory of revivals to a level with that of other social ferments, and they will be, like other social ferments, shallow, pretentious, short-lived. The grand idea of "visitation from the living God," having mercy on whom he will have mercy, drops out of them. They have then no more religious value than a commercial panic. Few things in this world are so disastrous to the cause of Christ as a perverted and degraded revival of religion.

Learn a lesson from St. Paul. Mark the unconscious satire with which he treats even a duty commanded by God, when men would exalt it out of place. When appealed to by certain cliques of Christians who thought it of vital importance whose hands had rested on them in baptism, and were crying, "Apollos baptized me," and "Cephas baptized me," and "Paul baptized me," he responds, "I know not whether I baptized," as if he would say, "Baptism — what is that? Who cares

for it? I do not remember any thing about it. I am sent to preach the gospel." So nothing is worth remembering which men would lift into rank with repentance, but which is not repentance.

So far as my observation of revivals has extended, impenitent men, and especially impenitent youth, need much more frequently to be warned against these religious substitutions in acts of "self-committal" than to be exhorted to the performance of them. Their value is immensely overrated, and their perils overlooked, in modern evangelistic labor.

(14) Another principle bearing upon this subject is that the tendency of popular religious excitement to morbid growths is proportioned to the insignificance of the executive action to which it is directed. Neither nature nor grace in normal action fosters profound agitations of conscience about petty things. Make such things the center of intense convictions of conscience, and you inevitably create religious distortions. The prick of a needle in the spinal marrow may make a child a hunchback for life. So let an awakened conscience be penetrated deeply concerning action which is not significant of character, and its working becomes diseased. The penetration results in ulceration.

(15) Therefore it is always the aim of a wise preacher in a revival to guide the current, and, still more carefully, a torrent of quickened emotion, as soon as possible into the even tenor of life's ordinary duties. The speciality of a revival of religion in itself is not a desirable thing. The sooner it ceases to be exceptional, and flows into life's common channel of interests, the better. Religious excitement has no value any further than it can be thus utilized in the sanctifying of common life. All conversions, until they receive the test

of real life, are of the nature of death-bed repentance in this respect, that they have not been subjected to the divinely appointed discipline of religious character. Hence it is seldom, if ever, wise to suspend for any long time the common routine of life, because of the presence of the Holy Ghost in regenerating power. We can devise no better means of moral discipline. We dislocate the divine plan, if we displace that in the attempt to improve upon it.

On one occasion, in a powerful revival in Amherst College, the more zealous Christian students sent a petition to the faculty, that for one week the collegiate curriculum might be suspended, that the whole time and interest of students might be concentrated upon the concerns of eternity. The object of the petition was above question. The methods proposed were plausible. But the president, the Rev. Dr. Humphrey, had had large experience in revivals. He told the young men that their policy was unwise. He said, in substance, that their theory assumed that the Holy Spirit was pressed for time, and was in haste to go elsewhere. The routine of collegiate duties was the very test which God had then and there ordained of the sincerity of those religious conversions. If students were converted, those very duties were to prove it, and to discipline their piety. Religion was to make them more industrious students, better scholars, more faithful to college laws. The monitor's bills would test their piety. The scale of scholarship would disclose it. On the other hand, he told them that the surest way to divert their religious interest into unhealthy moods, which would soon end it, was to relax the discipline of academic duty, and leave them nothing but prayer and praise and religious conversation to think

of and to do. He told them, in a word, that they could not improve upon the divine method of procedure in the discipline of Christian character. The petition was kindly refused; and the result was a prolonged and healthful work of divine grace, quiet and deep in its progress,—quiet, because deep, and so powerful, that, at the close of the year, seven-eighths of the students in college were Christians.

The principle involved in President Humphrey's reasoning was the same with that now before us. As religious excitement degenerates if isolated from common life, so, if you restrict it to secondary and indecisive duties, its tendency is to the same morbid growths. The more petty a thing is, the more tumultuous is popular excitement about it when once the *furor* is ignited. Great ideas tend to deep emotions: these, again, tend to tranquil and balanced action. Petty ideas, insignificant objects of feeling, indecisive duties, tend to effervescent emotion, and this to noise and clatter and confusion. Proverbially the great workings of God are still workings, and this because they are deep workings. Grace follows the analogy of nature. Everywhere greatest power is stillest power.

(16) Therefore the phenomenon is often witnessed in revivals, that, the more complicated the human machinery is which is set in motion, the more uncontrollable is the drift to morbid paroxysms. Such machinery almost always precedes pathological disturbances of the physical system. Even when popular excitement does not rise to hysteria, you will often perceive that the things men are thinking of, and talking of, and exciting themselves about, relate to the machinery alone. The anxious-seat, the inquiry-meeting, the rising for prayer, the covenant, the public speaking, the street singing,

the thousand and one expedients to promote the interest of novelty, absorb the popular thought. You hear almost nothing of deepening convictions of sin, of new discoveries of God, of new disclosures of the work of Christ, and of new conceptions of the work of God's Spirit. Ask for these evidences of regeneration, and you are met by a painful silence, or a gaping ignorance of your meaning.

(17) The conclusion of this train of thought, then, is this, that the true policy in the conduct of modern revivals is the old apostolic policy. Exalt the one and only act which God requires of an impenitent sinner. Exhort men to repent. Exhort them to be reconciled to Christ. Show them that they are enemies to Christ. Show them that they are exposed to eternal woe, because they have exposed themselves to eternal sin. Hold up Christ as the only and sufficient Saviour. Emphasize the work of the Holy Ghost as the only spiritual power that equals their spiritual helplessness. Ply thus the immeasurable motives to repentance, without which no man ever did repent, or ever can. Never permit the awakened conscience to elude that one act. Keep secondary things in the background. Warn men against counterfeits of repentance. The Scriptures are full of such warnings. Human nature in every age needs them.

I have termed the method here advocated "the apostolic policy." So far as we know, it was the policy of the Day of Pentecost. There is nothing in it which should limit it to apostolic times; nor is there any thing discernible in the diathesis of modern society which should require the abandonment of it in modern revivals. Experience indicates, that, just so far as it is displaced, revivals become a mixture of good and evil,

with a constant tendency of the evil to override and overwhelm the good.

5th, A fifth principle respecting the conduct of appeals is that they should be specific in their basis and their aim. The point from which they spring should be well defined: the point at which they strike should be equally so. They should never course at random in the air. The following facts deserve attention.

(1) Our common stock of religious thought contains much which may stimulate, yet not discipline, religious emotion. The majority of men in Christian lands are trusting to a certain religiosity of temperament. They prize their good moods. Their dialect in speaking of religious subjects indicates that they have no strong points of religious experience. Indefinite religious appeal works directly into the service of this capital error. Start the flow of natural religiosity by exhortation founded on nothing specific, and aiming at nothing in detail, and you may make ungodly men think very well of themselves for possessing sensibility enough to enjoy a mood of good feeling, when it may be that they have experienced nothing but a response of their nervous system to your elocutionary magnetism. There may be as much religion in their sympathy of nerve with the electric currents of an *Aurora borealis*.

(2) Sensibility to indefinite religious appeal easily passes also into the imaginative type of religious character. Not being reined up to specific duties by clear-cut convictions and intelligent emotions, it revels in æsthetic imaginings. The beauty of religion, rather than its obligations, the poetry of the gospel, rather than salvation by it, the literature of the Bible, rather than its authority, the sign of the cross, the worship of the eucharist, rather than the life of spiritual conflict which

Christianity reveals, become the charm of religious service. "Thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that can play well on an instrument."

Nothing more surely diverts religious thinking into this channel of imaginative luxury than the habit of listening to indefinite religious hortations from the pulpit. Exhort men merely to "be good and do good," and end there, and the probability is almost a certainty that they will wander from the strong points in Christian faith to amuse themselves with melodramatic trifles. Feeling which might be consolidated into a principle is thus kept in a fluid state for the want of something concrete to consolidate itself upon. In sheer debility of grasp upon any thing in real life, it muses over a wreath of evergreen or a painted window.

(3) Very different are preaching and its effects as recorded in the Scriptures. Prophets and Apostles and our Lord start with definite forms of religious doctrine, and aim them at specific points of religious practice. When men wander into dreamland in their notions of religious life, they are brought back to realities by such rebukes as these: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices?" "Bring no more vain oblations;" "Your feasts my soul hateth;" "Wash you; make you clean."

Not the sinfulness of sin, not the beauty of holiness, are the scriptural topics of appeal so frequently as the guilt of covetousness, of pride, of lying, of unbelief, of evil-speaking, of licentious imagination, and the duties of almsgiving, of honest weights, of self-sacrifice, of prayer, of repentance, of faith. The strong points and sharp points of Christian truth are the very points which inspired preachers use most eagerly. On the other hand, the sensitive points of human practice, the

festering ulcers of human guilt, those which a deceived conscience covers most carefully from rebuke, are the very points which they attack most mercilessly. To the most saintly devotees of the age they say, "Ye generation of vipers!" To such, they apply the lancet and the scalpel.

The character of the emblems by which truth and its effects are symbolized in the Scriptures proclaims the same design. Truth is a sword; it is a two-edged sword; it pierces; it divides soul from spirit. Things which no human analysis ever separated, it analyzes, and holds up to the eye of conscience. They to whom Peter preached were pricked: they were pricked in the heart, — the organ which a needle can not enter without causing death. Saul of Tarsus was goaded by pricks. The hoof of an ox could not resist them. An ox-goad is the emblem of the truth which prostrated him "trembling and astonished."

ASSIGNMENT

You now need to submit a preliminary copy of your Cumulative Summary and a preliminary copy of your Outline after taking the test for this section and before starting your official minimum attendance for Lesson XXXIX.

Your minimum required attendance for Lesson XXXIX will not begin until you have submitted this preliminary copy of your Cumulative Summary and a preliminary copy of your Outline and received notice that they have been accepted.

You will be able to change your Cumulative Summary later, should you choose to do so, before turning it in for final acceptance along with your final Outline. - Dr. VBK