

LECTURE V.

CLERICAL INFLUENCE WITH THE EDUCATED CLASSES, ITS CHARACTER. — THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD, THEIR RELATIONS DISTORTED.

(3) PURSUING a little further our review of the relations of the clergy to the educated classes, let us observe that clerical influence over those classes is very largely a reflexive influence. It rolls back over the cultivated heights of society by the force of its accumulations below. Do we not all sometimes trace our first response to a preacher's influence, even our discovery of the fact that he has in him the germs of power as a leader of men, to the fact of his moving others? We feel his power through the medium of our respect for his power over them. No man who is not past feeling any thing great can be insensible to the spectacle of a man moving to their eternal well being the masses of uncultured mind by so simple an instrument as preaching. There is a sublimity in it which all feel who are not imbruted in sensuality. The educated mind will involuntarily extend to such a man a respect to which his culture can lay no claim.

The landed gentry of England flocked to hear Whitefield, not because of any thing in him which *they* discovered: the discoverers of his genius were the uncultivated throngs in the fields and on the commons

of England. It was the great field-preacher in the lowlands whose voice reverberated to the surrounding heights, and commanded a respect which might never have found expression in any other way. The refinement, and the culture, and the wealth, and the noble birth of England, never found the man out till the rudeness, and the ignorance, and the plebeian tastes, and the poverty of England, had opened *hearts* to him. Then the classic *heads* of England came to their senses about him. Mr. Spurgeon, in our own day, is illustrating the same phenomenon.

One of the most useful of American evangelists, when he began to speak in public, was advised by a group of wise men not to expose thus his infirmities of speech and poverty of thought. For the time they were right in that counsel. Even now he would not claim that his right to speak consists in the affluence of his materials, or the elegance of his diction. Yet the *élite* of Boston and Brooklyn numbered thousands in his audiences. Such critics as those of "The New-York Tribune" found a theme of thoughtful discussion in his work as a social phenomenon.

Why is this? Not, probably, because of any thing which *they* feel of power in his discourses, but because they feel the fact that other thousands of lower grade are moved by him. His power over his superiors is a reflection of his power over his and their inferiors. A secret conviction sways thoughtful minds, that such a man is in many respects a representative of a Christ-like ministry. His success is one of the natural sequences of the preaching of the gospel in ways in which spiritual power takes precedence of all other elements of successful speech. The thing which he is

doing is the business of a Christian preacher. The higher classes no less resolutely than the lower withhold their spirit of obeisance from any man who is too good for it, too refined, too scholarly, too gentlemanly, or too indolent and too weak. The preacher, therefore, who has no power with the common people, has, in fact, no power with anybody. The pulpit which has no standing-ground down in the lowlands of society has none anywhere. An exclusive ministry is always a weak ministry.

(4) The weakness of an exclusive ministry is often not disclosed till spiritual emergencies arise. In quiet times, specially in stagnant times, it may pass undetected. But let emergencies come which agitate all classes, and then the hollowness of such a ministry will reveal itself to all classes. The cultivated will be as prompt as those below them to detect it, and to fling it from them. They look around them for a spiritual leader, to some man who has not sought to please them. Over the heads, it may be, of their own pastors, they will look to some minister of Christ whom they descry in the distance, down on the plain, in the dust and the heat of the battle. For such a man, whose spiritual power has been proved by emergencies, the rest of us must fall back to the right and to the left. The Church wants *him*. The heart of the Church has felt the pulsations of his heart; and now the brain of the Church singles him out by a judgment well-nigh unanimous. The Church wants his experience; she wants his knowledge of men; she wants his insight into the popular necessities; she wants his skill in touching the springs of popular sensibility: more than all else, she wants his sympathy with God's spirit in movement

upon the popular conscience. Under such conditions, *vox populi vox Dei*. Such a man always finds his reward even in this world: it is only a question of time.

14. Another sequence of any general deficiency in clerical knowledge of and sympathy with men is the establishment of anomalous relations between the church and the world.

The biblical idea of the church is simply that of an organized body of regenerate mind: the biblical idea of the world is that of the unsaved multitude of unregenerate mind. Two classes of character, and only two, make up the human race as the Scriptures represent it; viz., saints and sinners, friends of God and enemies of God. Much of the power of the pulpit depends on assuming the reality of that distinction. One of the chief objects of church organization is to make that distinction vivid. A living church always fastens that distinction upon the conscience of the world. Apostolic preaching was full of it. Religious reformations always rejuvenate it. Often the first evidence of a religious awakening is a new illumination of that one thought in the experience of the church and in the convictions of lookers-on.

On the other hand, the amenities of Christianized social life tend to obscure, even to obliterate, that distinction. This is specially true in nations of vigorous mental stock. In such nations Christianity displaces barbarism by refinement: it drives depravity out of brutal into aspiring forms; it crowds the savage under cover of the lofty vices. The churchly idea is then in perpetual conflict with its imitations for its own existence. The tendency is often almost overpowering to

confound regenerate graces with ornate and silken forms of irreligion.

In such a state of society — and it is one which is inevitable in any nation which has reached the higher stages of a Christian civilization — very much depends on the adjustments of the pulpit. The pulpit has an office like that of “Old Mortality” in Walter Scott’s romance, — to cut over again, and engrave deeper in the popular conscience, the conviction of the old distinction between saint and sinner. One of the vital aims of the pulpit must be to enforce the scriptural ideal of what the church should be and of what the world is. Any thing which enervates the pulpit in that work must tend to fuse the church and the world together in the judgment even of thoughtful men. The reality of consecration on the one side and of ungodly living on the other will grow dim in proportion as each approaches the other in its external signs.

The point, therefore, to be emphasized is, that any general deficiency in the clerical knowledge of the world must tend directly to that end: it must tend to blot out this churchly distinction. It is well known that the theory of the moral nature of man which has been taught in some New-England pulpits has resulted, in some cases, in the abolition of all church organization, and the disuse of the Lord’s Supper as the token of churchly prerogative. To the same result tends ignorance of the world in clerical ministrations. It tends to leave the fusion of the church and the world to go on unchecked by any forcible delineations of the difference between them. A ministry not knowing men as they are will not preach to men as they are. Not recognizing the face of their own contemporaries,

they will not speak to their own contemporaries. Men who do not themselves feel the pulsations of the popular heart can not minister to the real diseases of the popular condition.

Furthermore, the pulpit, under such circumstances, is apt to be full of side-issues. Preaching becomes powerless from overshooting, or shooting at random. Preaching by routine takes the place of original thinking. One is reminded by it of the old rule of English military tactics, by which a platoon of infantry, at the command "Fire," were taught to discharge their muskets on a dead level before them, without aiming at any thing, and then to wheel around to the rear.

Such preachers will often preach against forms of sin which are for the time extinct, and exhort to virtues which are just there out of place, and just then untimely. They may describe fossilized characters, instead of the living men and women. They will depict sinners in the general, and saints in the abstract, instead of American or English Christians and sinners. They will urge proportions of truth which the popular conscience will not respond to as the most pressing need of the hour. They will preach in a dialect which is not abreast with the growth of the language. They will hold on to phraseology which is obsolete everywhere else than in the pulpit. They will betray no insight into the modes of thinking, the types of inquiry, the subjects of interest, the convictions of truth, and the tendencies to error, which are in the living souls around them. They will preach so that many thoughtful men will not believe them: as many more will not believe that they believe themselves. No large proportion of a community will feel their presence as that of a reli-

gious power. The masses of society especially, who are immersed in the struggle for a livelihood, will not come within reach of the echo of their voices.

A church formed under the influence of such a ministry, it is obvious, can have no power of conquest in the world. The sense of distinction between it and the world must become practically defunct. Thinking men will feel, and blunt men will say, that there *is* no difference between the character and life of such a church and many of the more respectable forms of worldliness. Worldly organizations with religion enough in them for ornament, associations for reform, charitable leagues, secret societies, will grow up and take the place of the church in the estimation of many, because they see no churchly mission in actual operation, of which they feel the need.

Meanwhile the deepest religious inquiries of men of profound conscience do not turn to such a church for an answer. Those inquiries go on outside of the church, with no leanings to it, and no listening ear for its teachings. A class of thoughtful men arise who are not in the church, who do not wish to be there, who can not be persuaded to be there, and yet whose consciences do not convict them when the pulpit, in stereotyped phrase, prays for deliverance from "the world, the flesh, and the devil," and declaims against "haters of God, and enemies of the cross of Christ." They form a third class who are not consciously the one thing or the other. They do not "profess and call themselves Christians;" yet their consciences do not respond when the pulpit addresses them as sinners in distinction from saints.

You can judge for yourselves of the extent to which

this picture is approximately true in our own day. The main point which I wish to observe is, that such a state of things is a distortion of the normal relations of church and world, and that it results inevitably from any general sense of clerical unfitness to the world of real life. It follows as a necessary sequence, when the popular mind is left in want of a ministry which is wise in its knowledge of its own times, thoroughly cordial in its sympathy with its own times, and vigorous in adapting the pulpit to the spiritual wants of its own times. This third class of minds need a living pulpit in order to be made sensible of the presence of a living church. They need, not a pulpit of the past, not a pulpit of the future, but a pulpit of to-day. They need to see a live man at the head of the elect. Else their response is quick and stern, "Who are you, that you should claim to be elect?"

As to the material of preaching, they need not so much new truth as old truth freshened. They want the ancient substance of the gospel as apostles preached it, but clothed in the experience of to-day, and coming out boldly yet winningly in the speech of to-day. They want the old creeds of the church, which reverent men and saintly women have chanted, translated into the dialect of common life. They claim the right to test those creeds as uninspired productions. They *will* test them by the common sense of men in the interpretation of God's word. In that process they claim that the advance which the human mind has been making in centuries of popular development shall be recognized. They ask that the Scriptures as represented by modern creeds shall seem to be consistent with themselves and

with the necessary convictions of the race. They wait, sometimes a long while, for a living pulpit which shall speak out for them these yearnings of their own souls, and help them to understand themselves. No other kind of ministry can ever win them to the visible church of Christ.

Here the inquiry is pertinent for the moment, What would be the consequence of a permanent isolation of the clergy from the popular sympathy? I answer without hesitation, The destruction of the church as a living power. The few whom we now recognize as a third class—not churchmen, yet not reprobates, earnest thinkers and of upright lives—would increase in numbers and in influence. Christianity is too far advanced in its conquest of human thought to be extinguished by the defection of one or two generations of either church or clergy. In other hands Christian thinking would live, and Christian discussion would make itself heard. Now and then platoons of inquirers would fall back into infidelity. Here and there fraternities of them would become absorbed in moral reforms. But the bulk of them would press their way into some form of organization which should express the idea of Christian fellowship, but which, we may be assured, they would not call a church. They would then create for themselves and their children some order of religious teachers which they would not call a clergy. Meanwhile, as it respects power of conquest in the world, by the side of such an organization the church and her clergy would be stranded.

But we need not fear any such result. God does not permit the clergy to fall permanently out of rank into false relations to the world. It is cheering to note how

seasonably divine intervention prevents that disaster. Religious awakenings on the eve of emergencies are constantly vitalizing the pulpit anew. Metaphorically speaking, new blood is put into clerical leadership. The spiritual anæmia is cured. Preachers are often, in popular phrase, "reconverted." Men who have been deficient in consecrated graces, and some of whom have held theories unfriendly to direct ministrations, are reformed. They either preach inconsistently with their theories, or they change their views, and seem to themselves to experience a new baptism from the Holy Ghost. By some means the end will always be gained, of securing to the church a ministry which shall be sympathetic with their own generation, and studious of the wants of their own times.

The views here advanced I am very sensible are liable to misinterpretation. It is difficult to state the truth on the subject forcibly without exaggeration. Principles affirmed must be qualified, and some of the qualifications are as important as the principles. Statements of fact also must be limited; and often the limitations are essential to prevent invidious comparisons. I have endeavored to limit and to qualify as the truth demands; yet I am sensible of the danger of seeming to judge the ministry cynically.

I beg you to note, therefore, that the criticisms upon men, implied in my remarks on this subject, I do not apply to the evangelical body indiscriminately. They are true of many in some sections of the church, and of few in others; of many at some periods, and of few at others. Let me quote here a slip which I take from one of the secular periodicals of London. I by no means indorse it. I present it as a specimen of the

impression which may be unconsciously made upon men of the world by an educated, refined, scholarly clergy representing one or more of the historic denominations of Christendom.

The editor in question classifies the clergy of England thus: "We have first the mild, school-visiting, weak-eyed, tea-drinking, croquet-playing curate, with a strong conviction that he stands in need of feminine sympathy; then the pet parson, who finds his way into the drawing-rooms of fashionable watering-places, as a fly into a sugar-basin; then the comical parson, who is great in organizing archery clubs and bazaars, as well as in enacting the part of social buffoon on every possible opportunity; then the dancing parson and the hunting parson; and lastly the parson who is denominated *par excellence* 'fast.'"

You will observe here, that no place is found for apostolic ministers of Christ, in numbers sufficient to form a class, in the whole body of the English clergy. Nothing limits it absolutely to the clergy of the Establishment. The picture is, of course, a caricature: more, it is a libel upon very valuable branches of the church of Christ. Yet even as a caricature it is instructive. Caricatures do not spring up like mushrooms. This one could not have existed if the classes which it satirizes did not exist in sufficient numbers to suggest it, and to be suggested by it. It could not exist if there were not a considerable minority of the clergy who are making on the world the impression which it exaggerates. They are men of the world in all that makes up its artificial life, and yet are not feeling after and ministering to the profound necessities of the world as a world of lost sinners for whom Christ died. I repeat,

therefore, that, in some sections of the church, the criticisms I have made are true of many, and in others of few. My belief is, that in all they are applicable to a minority, and that, relatively, a small one. In some periods of history, also, these criticisms are more obviously true than at others.

But at all periods, in all sections, under all conditions of real life, the *peril* which they suggest exists. This is the point which I wish to impress. The tendency to the disastrous state of things which they imply is always attendant upon the preaching of the gospel in a world like this by such instrumentalities as even the best that human nature furnishes. The tendency lies deep in our civilization to subordinate moral distinctions to social distinctions, and therefore to be swayed by whatever is found afloat on the surface of the so-called "upper classes" of society.

Let that tendency become dominant in the ministrations of the gospel, and it betrays itself in such phenomena as these; viz., the organization of churches by social affinities chiefly; the erection of church edifices so costly and ornate that the poor can not feel at home in them; the crowding together of such churches in fashionable localities, in which "society" lives, and "the people" do not; the consequent adjustment of an educated pulpit to educated hearers only; the gradual separation of the poor from the rich and of the ignorant from the cultivated in religious worship; the gradual concentration, therefore, of the wealthy and the refined into one or two denominations of Christians; the usage in those denominations of acting upon the poor and the ignorant, if at all, by methods which create a sense of social distance between the superior and inferior; the

sequence that success in winning the inferiors to Christ is made impossible, and the effort to do it under such conditions farcical; and finally, as the result of all these things, a worldly ambition among the clergy to be magnates over magnificent churches whose secret pride is that they have no poor, no ignorant, no rude worshipers in their gorgeous temples, and whose fixed purpose it is not to tolerate such worshipers under the same roof with themselves.

It is this peril which I have wished to portray temperately yet truthfully. I think there are facts in the present drift of things in our own denomination, specially in our cities, which should set us on double guard against it. Calvinistic denominations are all giving evidences of its existence. The rise of Methodism was a revolt of spiritual forces against it. But now, even Methodism gives signs of its encroachment upon the ancient discipline.

The establishment of mission-chapels in our large cities by the prominent evangelical sects is, in my judgment, a very questionable experiment. It has not the right *look* for the working of a Christian church. I am not prepared to say that it may not be the best thing now practicable, things being as they are. Human nature must be taken as we find it, in the higher classes as in the lower. In such a reform of Christian usage as these remarks suggest, we must begin by working as we can. We must cherish the patient virtues with which the apostles trained the imperfect graces of the early church. But the first thing we have to do is to see our existing policy as it is. We should mark its inevitable tendency to foster a classification of Christians by mutual repulsion of classes

from each other. Its tendency is directly to falsify the apostolic principle which lies at the very foundation of a church of Christ: "We, being many, are *one* body in Christ." Whatever may be said in defense of it, it is just what Christ did *not* do when he entered Jerusalem as a preacher. It is just what the apostles did not do at Corinth and at Ephesus. Is it not what neither of them would do to-day if they were to itinerate among our American churches?

To illustrate the temptation to which a pastor *may* be exposed by the spirit of caste in our metropolitan churches, let me relate a single case which occurred in one of our Eastern cities. A certain preacher of considerable local popularity had gathered a large and wealthy and intelligent congregation, not surpassed, if equaled, by any other in the State. Not a pew was unsold in the church, and not a seat often vacant on the Lord's Day. Applications for pews were made months in advance of a supply. Every thing that could minister to the pastor's worldly comfort or ambition he had at his command. For salary, voyages to Europe, increase of library, long vacations, he had only to ask, and he received. The social eminence of his congregation created an eminence for him on which he was seen and sought after from afar. Yet he was not content. He felt himself restrained from the work of his life by the very luxury of his position, and this from the fact that he had none of God's *poor* among his people. Not one family worshiped in his church from the humbler walks of life. It could not be said of his ministry, "To the poor the gospel is preached." They could not shun a pest-house more cautiously than they did his church-door. The long row of private car-

riages before it, some of them with liveried drivers on the boxes, on a Sunday morning, was a grief to him. He had no agrarian sympathies; but he felt himself called of God to preach to the drivers as well as to their masters.

He at length sought a consultation with the leading men in his society, and told them his affliction. He told them frankly that he had done all he could do for them and their families, conditions being as they were, and now he wanted an increase of his congregation of a different social rank. He asked them to put galleries into their church edifice, hoping by that means to achieve his object. They heard him respectfully, but blandly refused his request. He reasoned and pleaded with them, to no effect. They thought he was hypochondriac, and offered to send him to Europe. But to go to Europe would be only to "change the place, and keep the pain." He was an hypochondriac of the class to which our Lord belonged when he wept over Jerusalem. He must preach the gospel to the poor, or he could not be content with his life's work. His people argued that galleries would injure the architecture of their beautiful temple; but he reasoned them out of that fear, so far at least as to silence them.

At last they plainly told him that it would be disagreeable to them and their families to have a crowd of the poor thronging the same place of worship with themselves. They belonged to the high classes of society, and wished to remain such. They would not have galleries over their heads. One of the saints told him plainly that he did not believe that God meant to have the rich and the poor worship under the same roof. He had ordained the distinction, and was re-

sponsible for the consequences. The pastor, with grief and indignation, at length told them that it was more than he could bear. Much as he loved them, grateful as he felt for their kindness, he must leave them. Preach to the poor somewhere he must and would, if he had to go into the streets to do it. And they let him go into the street. They found a successor who was not "hypochondriac." All honor to the man! But what of the church as a spiritual power in the world? How soon would such churches, though as the stars of heaven in multitude, be successful in the conversion of the world? Indeed, how much better would the world be than it is now, if it were converted to the type of Christianity which such churches represent? Give me rather the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, and the faith of Cicero, than such a Christianity.

Return to course main page and take test #5.
Test is open book.