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ANNALS

OF THE

AMERICAN PULPIT;

OR

COMMEMORATIVE NOTICES

OF

DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

OF

VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS,

FROM THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COUNTRY TO THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR
EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE.

WITH HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS.

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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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VOLUME IV.
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WILLIAM ASHMEAD.*

1820—1829.

WILLIAM ASHMEAD, a son of William and Margaret Ashmead, was born in Philadelphia in the year 1798. His grandfather, though a sea-faring man, had considerable taste for literature, and wrote his own epitaph in verse, in which he beautifully alludes to the remarkable fact of his having completed one hundred voyages, in connection with the hope which he cherished of reaching the haven of eternal rest. The subject of this sketch, from his early childhood, discovered a great fondness for books, and a proportional disrelish for youthful amusements. Dr. Rush, who was a frequent visitor at his grandfather's, is said to have had his attention drawn to him as a boy of remarkable promise. At the age of thirteen or fourteen, he became a clerk in a bookstore, where he industriously devoted his leisure to reading; and, as the books which he read were chosen without any regard to system or method, he afterwards considered this exercise of his faculties as having contributed little to his substantial intellectual growth.

Having gone through the studies preparatory to entering College, he became a member of the University of Pennsylvania, where he had a high standing as a scholar through his whole course, and graduated in the class of 1818. He determined to devote himself to the Gospel ministry, and with a view to this put himself under the theological instruction of the late Rev. Dr. James P. Wilson, of Philadelphia,—eminent alike for his logical power and his extensive erudition; but, as he was at this time without the means of support, he was compelled to resort to the business of teaching in order to defray his expenses. The labours of the day in superintending his classes, and the labours of the night in prosecuting his studies, proved too much for his constitution; and his pallid countenance, and frequent headaches, and shattered nerves, soon admonished him of the necessity of relaxing from the severity of his intellectual toil.

In 1819, he was married to Clara Forrester of Lancaster County, Pa.

In the spring of 1820, he was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Philadelphia; and his first efforts in the pulpit were received with high approbation, and were considered as giving promise, if his life should be spared, of eminence in his profession. His youthful appearance, his benignant countenance, his persuasive manner, quickly rendered him a favourite, wherever he was known.

Shortly after he was licensed, he made a journey on horseback into the mountainous region of Northumberland and Sunbury, chiefly for the benefit of his health. On his return, he preached with great acceptance in New Brunswick, N. J., and was afterwards requested to allow himself to be considered as a candidate for settlement; but, as a portion of the congregation, on account of his extreme youth, doubted the expediency of the measure, he declined the application. About this time, he was invited to take charge of the Congregation in Sunbury,—a small town on the Susquehanna, which he had visited a few months before; and this invitation he would probably have accepted, but that a call now reached him from the

* Memoir prefixed to his Sermons.—Chr. Adv., 1830.—MS. from Rev. Dr. J. P. Wilson.

Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, Pa., which he justly regarded as opening a wider field of ministerial usefulness. Accordingly, he accepted this latter call, and for upwards of eight years served that highly influential church with great ability and fidelity. He exerted an important influence here, as well upon the intellectual as the religious interests of the community, and especially in establishing an Academy, in aid of which, after some difficulty, he succeeded in obtaining a donation from the Legislature. In 1824, he received a unanimous call from the Church in New Brunswick, to which he had preached two years before, to become their Pastor; but his congregation earnestly resisted the application, and his answer was in accordance with their wishes.

In consequence of an impaired state of health, induced by excessive labour in connection with a sedentary habit, he journeyed to the South in the autumn of 1828, in the hope that change of climate, and a few months' relaxation from professional cares, might restore to him his accustomed vigour. And the desired effect seemed in a good degree to be realized. He passed some time in Charleston, S. C., where he preached occasionally, and with great acceptance. Whilst at Washington, in the winter of 1829, on his return to Lancaster, he received a unanimous call from the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, which had enjoyed the benefit of his occasional services during his visit there, to become its Pastor. Mr. Ashmead, convinced that he could not long endure the climate of Lancaster, and that the more genial climate of Charleston would in all probability be the means of protracting both his usefulness and his life, regarded this as a call of Providence which he had no right to decline; and, accordingly, he resigned his charge at Lancaster, and reached Charleston,—the scene, as he supposed, of his future labours, on the 25th of April. Here he was received with every expression of the most cordial regard, and was installed Pastor of the Church, May 17, 1829. About five weeks after his installation, he returned to Pennsylvania, with a view to make arrangements for the removal of his family. He had a serious attack of bilious fever before leaving Charleston, and another shortly after his arrival at Lancaster; from both of which he slowly recovered. While he was waiting with his family at Philadelphia to take passage for Charleston, the fever again returned upon him, though apparently in a mitigated form; and at the end of two weeks, his physicians declared that it was subdued. It was a sore disappointment to him that he was not able to return to his people at the time appointed, and he requested that they should be apprized of the cause, and of the changes that occurred in his situation from time to time. Shortly after this, he seems to have had little hope of recovery, though his friends did not despair concerning him till a very short time before his death. He spoke of an inward feeling which admonished him that his disease would be fatal. At first he seemed to cling to life with some tenacity: he said, "O my God, spare me to praise thee, and serve thee with more ardour than I ever have! Spare me to my dear wife and children. I trust it is not inconsistent for me to desire to live. Dr. —, who is a holy man and lives near to God, once reproved me on that subject, after I had preached a sermon, in which I had painted in glowing colours the desire of the righteous man to die, and the triumphs of a death-bed. I believe there have been a few good men who have desired to die,—such as Brainerd, Edwards, and Baxter,—but in general there is no instinct so strong as that with which we

cling to life. But," he added, "if I am to die at this time, dying grace will be given me. God can make me willing to leave all." And this remark was delightfully verified. His last days furnished a most edifying exhibition of Christian faith, humility, and triumph. A few moments before he ceased to breathe, he said to his wife,—“You can come to me, though I cannot return to you.” He then desired that his head should be raised, and the moment it was done, the conflict was over, and the spirit had gone to its rest. He died after an illness of six weeks, December 2, 1829, in his thirty-second year, leaving a widow, and six children all under ten years of age.

Mr. Ashmead, considering his age, was an accomplished and thorough scholar. He read with ease the French, Spanish and Italian languages, and had made some proficiency in the German also, when his declining health obliged him to relinquish it. In the winter of 1825, he commenced a translation of Saurin's Historical, Critical and Theological Discourses; but in this labour also, after he had made considerable progress, he was arrested by ill health. He was alive to the beauties of poetry, though it is not known that he ever attempted that kind of composition. He was also familiar with the different systems of moral science and metaphysics; but the longer he lived, the more the sacred volume became endeared to him above all other books. He read the Scriptures daily in the original languages, and found in them beauties which he looked for in vain in the most perfect of uninspired productions.

In 1826, he published an Essay on Pauperism, addressed to the Legislature of Pennsylvania then in session, in which was displayed great ingenuity and power of argument. Besides nearly two hundred sermons neatly written out, he left several valuable manuscripts of a miscellaneous kind, which have never been given to the public. Some of these are theological, some moral, and some strictly literary. It is somewhat remarkable that the only unfinished sermon among his manuscripts, and the last probably that he ever attempted, breaks off abruptly, with these words, which seem to have been prophetic: “Then, when this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality, shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory.”

Mr. Ashmead published the Sermon which he delivered on assuming the pastoral charge of the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, 1829. The next year after his death, a selection from his manuscript sermons was published in connection with a brief Memoir of his Life, in an octavo volume,—dedicated to his two congregations, in Lancaster and Charleston.

FROM SAMUEL HENRY DICKSON, M. D.,

PROFESSOR IN THE MEDICAL DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK:

NEW YORK, December 28, 1848.

Dear Sir: In fulfilling the promise I made to you some time since, I am surprised and a little mortified to find how indefinite and vague are my reminiscences of Mr. Ashmead. Yet it is many years since his death, and during the interval I have been occupied with much care, and gone through great suffering both of mind and body.

My acquaintance with Mr. Ashmead was not of long duration, but his character was so frank and open that I have always felt nevertheless that I knew him

well. Our intercourse, gradually becoming more intimate, was, I believe, fast ripening into friendship: its abrupt termination by his deeply lamented death, I trust, is not final.

He was born to be loved and esteemed, respected and confided in. With great clearness and force of expression, in the utterance of his thoughts he always mingled much courtesy and forbearance. Yet he was occasionally warm and enthusiastic, giving abundant proof of an ardent sincerity. With every gentlemanly anxiety to avoid offence, he was incapable of sacrificing an iota of principle, tenacious of opinions carefully formed, and prompt at all hazards to maintain whatever he believed to be right.

I remember a striking incident which occurred during his brief pastorate in Charleston, and which, if I can relate it correctly, at this distance of time, will, I think, exhibit some of the traits to which I have alluded.

It was the custom in the church over which he was minister, that persons, when about to commune for the first time, should make a solemn profession, standing in the broad aisle, before the attentive and silent congregation. Any one might be excused for regarding this species of notoriety with anxiety and apprehension; but to a modest and retiring woman, or a bashful girl, it must needs have been a sore trial,—enough to arouse the strongest sympathy and pity. It was always a scene painful to me to witness.

On the occasion of which I am writing, there was but one candidate for admission to church privileges,—a tall, graceful, accomplished and modest young lady, who has since become the wife of a distinguished clergyman. Her hands clasped before her, her cheeks crimsoned, her eyes suffused with tears, she stood trembling and alone, fronting the pulpit with the devouring gaze of the Assembly fixed upon her. The usual formula of question and mute reply being concluded, she retired to her father's pew, with a dignified effort to recover herself, but evidently profoundly overcome. Then Mr. Ashmead, lifting up his head, which had been bent down towards the catechumen, and raising his voice hitherto softened by his emotion, declared warmly his repugnance to the whole ceremony, denouncing it as obsolete and unadapted to time and circumstances; and proclaimed with some vehemence his fixed resolution never again to take any part in its performance. He ended by presenting in strong and condensed language a view of the reasons of his repugnance and dislike to it.

It soon became known that he had yielded in this matter, very reluctantly and under protest, to the strong will and determined purpose of one or more of the elders of the church, whose inflexible adherence to all ancient usages had long been matter of remark and annoyance. The severe censure of these influential persons was unavoidably incurred by the step he had taken, and he was destined, if he had lived, to pay a heavy penalty for having opposed their wishes. Of this he was fully aware; but however painful the anticipation, his sense of duty did not permit him to shrink from the consequences of the course of conduct which seemed to him to be the proper one.

I fear you may think this incident of too little interest to be of any avail in your proposed sketch. In the absence of any thing of more importance, however, I put it at your disposal, and remain,

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

SAMUEL HENRY DICKSON.