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FINDING THE BOOK OF THE LAW.

By ROBERT WHITTET, SR.

"When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he rent his clothes."—2 KINGS xxii. 11.

To know not we're amenable to law—
A law we wot not of, nor yet can tell
Aught of its precepts, nor how far they're well
Or ill; to feel no sense of solemn awe
Inspiring rev'rence for their maker, or to draw
Obedience, and then—as does light dispel
Night's darkness, and show the hidden pits that dwell
Unthought of in the way, and every flaw,
Revealing perils that entail defeat—
How startling 'tis, though past the danger point,
To see the risks we've run! and when once more
We feel that safety is assured, how sweet
To let the heart in gushing joy anoint
Itself in gratitude, and faith restore!

THE DECLINE OF THE PULPIT.

BY PROF. THOMAS R. ENGLISH, D. D.

ALL really great questions are trite and commonplace; questions of God and our relations to him; of sin and salvation: these have been discussed from the infancy of the race, and yet they are burning questions to-day, and we offer no apology in asking your attention to the subject before us as one of vital moment.

First, Has there been any decline in the pulpit? The answer depends largely upon what is meant by such a query.

1. If it means that the pulpit as an instrumentality for propagating the gospel, converting sinners, edifying saints, and setting up the kingdom of Christ upon earth, is inherently defective, or less adapted to this work than when the command was first given, "go preach," then we answer in the negative, most emphatically.

There are not a few who maintain the affirmative most strenuously. Professor Mahaffey, in his *Modern Preaching*, argues that the success of the pulpit at first was due in part to the novelty of the theme, which element is now wanting, as the "glad tidings" have long since ceased to be tidings at all. He argues, too, that the advance of education has shorn the pulpit of much of its power, since it can instruct only the ignorant. In answer to the first, it might be said that the eating of food has long since ceased to be a novelty, and yet it has by no means lost its charm, and spiritual food is just as welcome to the hungry soul to-day as it ever was. As to the pulpit being no longer able to instruct, it should be remembered that this applies only to the smallest minority; and, furthermore, it is not true that the educated man listens only to his superiors, for then the more learned a man became the fewer books he could read, and he would be debarred from converse with many very dear to him. As a matter of fact, the most learned are often the best and most earnest hearers of the word.

Positively, there are two reasons for affirming the perpetuity of the pulpit:

(1), Nothing can ever take the place of oral speech as a means of reaching and moving men. As long as there are ears to hear, so long will the music of the human voice attract, and the presence of the living speaker be a most potent factor. As well expect a time when the lover's tale will be whispered no longer into willing ears, and the confidences of the throbbing breast be communicated by the printed page, or by the impersonal phonograph. No! the spoken word will never lose its power, and the "old, old story" will continue to charm and bless so long as time endures.

(2), It is God's chosen method of making known his salvation. He who sees the end from the beginning, and makes no mistakes, has seen fit to save men by the "foolishness of preaching," and he is presumptuous indeed who would set it aside. After all, preaching is but an instrumentality, and the efficacy is all from him, so that whatever other method might be devised would have this radical defect that it was not of divine appointment. He who can "with the worm Jacob thresh the mighty mountains" can by the "foolishness of preaching" save them that believe, and to assert that the pulpit is a failure in this sense is to impugn both the wisdom and power of Jehovah.

2. But whilst maintaining most strenuously that there is no inherent defect in the pulpit as an institution, and that it is no less adapted to the work of propagating the gospel than it was at the beginning, we may still enquire as to the actual efficiency of the modern pulpit.

Does it exert the power for good that it once did, or has there been a decline in its actual efficiency?

From a careful survey of the situation we are reluctantly forced to the conclusion that there *has* been such a decline. In taking such a position we are not unmindful of the admonition of the wise man of Israel, "Say not thou what is the cause that the former days were better than these, for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this." Due allowance is also made for that tendency, as youth is left behind us, to look backwards instead of forwards, a tendency so strong that at times we honestly believe that in the halcyon days of the past everything was lovely—the skies were bluer, the sunlight brighter, the women fairer, the girls sweeter, and the mother's cooking unsurpassed! Nor are we unmindful of the fact that the same complaint *has*

been made in former days, for, to say nothing of a more remote period, a half century ago Professors Park and Miller in published articles bewailed the marked decline in the pulpit in their day. Nor are we in the least forgetful of the fact that there are to-day many pulpits whose glory is undimmed, and whose power for good has suffered no eclipse; and that there are still men of apostolic power, the worthy peers of the mighty dead, while thousands of valiant men, all unknown to fame it may be, still preach Christ and him crucified to dying men. But, in spite of all these and other deterrent considerations, we are constrained to believe that there has been an ominous downward tendency. Bear with us while we call to mind some of the facts upon which such a conclusion is based.

(1), There is the widely felt and acknowledged necessity of providing other attractions than those of the preached word to draw men to the sanctuary. In not a few churches the *music* is the chief feature, the singer and his selection being more prominent than the preacher and his message. "An attractive program" is the great desideratum, and much time and thought is spent in providing a treat for those who come.

Church advertising has come to be one of the "fine arts" of the day, and not only the daily papers, but even hand-bills are brought into requisition. Were it not pitiful and painful, it would be amusing to see the ingenious devices adopted to entice men to the house of God.

When the physician can administer his medicines only by disguising them, and when his drugs must be transmuted into appetizing sweets in order to induce his patient to take them, it is all too evident that his sceptre has departed; and when men must be baited and allured into the kingdom of heaven, and the yoke imposed upon them without their ever suspecting it, then the occupation of the Herald and Ambassador is gone.

(2), Consider the complicated machinery of the modern church, and see how small a part is played by the preaching of the word. Indeed, it looks as if the seminaries will have to give up the work of trying to train men as preachers and teachers and train them as "business managers" instead, and that "aptness to teach" will have to give way to executive ability as a prime qualification. In one of our church papers sometime since there appeared a communication laudatory of a certain minister,

saying that there was probably not another church in the Southern Assembly better organized than that presided over by him, and the claim must have been correct, as it was further stated that there were upwards of forty societies in that church. With all this multiplicity of leagues, and societies, and bands, and guilds, and brotherhoods, and what-nots, how is it possible for the pulpit to retain its pristine importance?

Whether you regard it as a cause, or an effect, the atrophy of the pulpit is the inevitable and necessary concomitant of such a state of affairs.

(3), The loss of independence on the part of the pulpit. Time was when the minister, as a physician of souls, determined the matter and form of his pulpit ministrations, but how few now have a controlling voice in such matters. Certain lines of truth are tabooed, and he is as straitly bound as the presidential candidate by the platform upon which he is nominated. Ask the merchant why he does not sell a better grade of goods, and he will tell you that he aims to meet the demands of his customers. Ask the newspaper man why his columns are filled with matter unfit for the public eye, and he will tell you that he aims to cater to the appetites of his readers. Ask the sensational preacher why he substitutes trash for words of truth and soberness, and he will tell you that it is because the people demand it, and it is the only kind that will draw. The painted cheek of the harlot proclaims that the natural charms no longer avail, and the tricks of the pulpit proclaims that it has lost to that extent its lawful grip upon the hearts and conscience of men.

(4), The change of attitude towards the pulpit. Reverence is by no means a distinguishing trait of the present age, and the pulpit perhaps has suffered most of all in this respect. Newspapers speak of "pulpit performances" and "pulpit stars" just as they do of the theatre. The pew talks back at the pulpit as never before, and the tendency to criticise and challenge its utterances is very strong. To some extent it is a healthy change, and will doubtless prove beneficial in the end, but at the same time it indicates that the pulpit has provoked it by its own failure. Every one admits the phenomenal decline of parental authority, but who so bold as to affirm that the responsibility for this change does not rest upon parents even more than upon the children. The minister who exercises his God-given authority

over the flock committed to him is about as rare as the man who is the head of his own house.

Years ago we were astonished by the remark of a good lady, a member of a church seeking a pastor, who said, "We need not expect to find a pastor to suit us, but we will just have to get a man and train him!" The remark no longer excites surprise, for most pastors are about as well "trained" as the average father.

(5), Mention might be made in this connection of the results of modern preaching, and it might be shown that in spite of the apparent prosperity of the church there are not wanting signs of a decay of vital godliness, and even its outward progress is anything but satisfactory.

Attention has been repeatedly called to the marked falling off in the number of professions of faith in all the leading denominations. Only recently the bishops of the M. E. Church North called for a week of prayer, in view of the fact that there had been an actual decrease in the membership of that church during the past year. In making this call they say, "We have one dire disease—spiritual famine—lack of witness of the Spirit, lack of personal experience, lack of spiritual power. The symptoms are many and various, but the disease is one."

Reports from the churches show that during the last ecclesiastical year the gain in the entire Presbyterian Church in the United States was only 1.2 per cent.; in the Baptist, 2 per cent.; Methodist, 5 per cent.; Episcopal, 1.5 per cent., and in the Southern Presbyterian 1.8 per cent.

The causes leading to this decline are so complicated that it would be unfair to cite this as an evidence of the decline of the pulpit, but the question may be fairly raised whether or not the pulpit is in part responsible. Enough has been said to show that there has been a decline in the efficiency of the pulpit, or, if not decline, yet the presence of grave elements of weakness.

Second, Let us now consider some at least of the leading causes of this alleged decline. In doing so let us bear in mind the fact that even if the decline be not admitted, still this does not invalidate the points sought to be made, since they bring to view certain elements of weakness which may or may not have yet resulted in actual decline.

(1), Lack of spiritual power. While preaching is an exercise of intellectual power, it is preëminently a putting forth of spiritual energy.

Pentecost perhaps affords the most striking exhibition of spiritual power, for under the preaching of a plain and unlettered fisherman 3,000 were converted in one day, and a revolution wrought in their lives.

How did it come about? For three years the apostles had been associated with their divine Lord and Master. They had seen his mighty works and listened to his words of grace and truth. They had been trained by him for the high and responsible work of preaching the gospel. Now the work of redemption was completed, and he was about to return to his Father. But they were not yet ready to go forth to their work. They must tarry at Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high, which power was to come through the holy Spirit. The power bestowed on that occasion was not exclusively, nor even mainly, miraculous. The Holy Ghost had wrought in them previously, but now in the fullness of his power. Their minds were illumined as never before. They saw sin in a clearer light than ever before. They had known Jesus but imperfectly, but now they saw him in all his power and grace. The way of salvation stood out clearly before them. Their affections were moved as never before, and their wills exercised in behalf of righteousness as never before. They grew by great leaps and bounds. Whole years were compressed into a few moments. The fruits of the flesh withered away, while the fruits of the Spirit grew as if by magic. They were filled with the Spirit, and hence with power. The Spirit is the only source of spiritual power, and no soul is ever converted or sanctified but through him, man being only the instrument, even as the wire conveys the electric current. Power must be received before it can be given forth, and we can only give forth that which we have received. If we would be the means of converting and sanctifying others, then we must ourselves experience that converting and sanctifying power. If we would salt others, we must first be salted ourselves; and if we would be a light to others, we must ourselves be enlightened. There is a strong tendency at present to distinguish sharply between the gift of the Spirit for salvation and for service; but while it is true that the Spirit may bestow certain gifts having no necessary con-

nection with the spiritual state of the recipient, as in the case of Bezaleel and Aholiab, yet ordinarily he fits us for service by fitting us for his kingdom. In other words, vital godliness and efficiency in saving souls are inseparable, and largely commensurate. In proportion as Christ dwells in us by faith, and we are moulded into his image, just in that proportion are we filled with power to fight his battles. The ministry of a McCheyne could hardly have been otherwise than a ministry of power. It was no surprising thing that 500 persons were converted under a single sermon by Rutherford when he and his companions spent the preceding night in prayer to God. This was just the secret of Paul's success: Christ dwelt in him. Says our Savior, "I am the vine, ye are the branches; he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit, for without me ye can do nothing." Here then is the crying need of the ministry to-day—more spiritual power—more vital godliness. One single man in close touch with the Master is worth a thousand without this requisite, even though possessing every other gift. Oh! for a baptism of the ministry, for then, and only then, when a consecrated ministry is found in the pulpit, can there be any putting forth of real power.

(2), Lack of deep conviction. The present is an age of doubt, and scepticism is in the very atmosphere, pervading every department of thought. It has invaded the sphere of religion, and the pulpit has not escaped.

We do not now refer to those wholesale and shameless defections from fundamental truth in this and other lands which have attracted so much attention of late, but rather to that feeling of uncertainty, oftentimes unacknowledged and even unconscious uncertainty, as to matters of vital moment—the word of God—sin and salvation—the reality and necessity of the new birth, etc. The whole moral atmosphere is charged with it, and its vicious influence is seen on every side. It manifests itself oftentimes in the very tone of the pulpit, and its silence upon certain topics is ominous. Quite frequently it is the head that is in the mist, while the heart still beats responsive to God. Doubt is the paralysis of all activity, and just as certainly as a clot of blood paralyzes the powers of speech and motion, so even an obscure doubt as to these divine verities destroys one's power as a witness for God. Faith, on the other hand, is the mainspring

of action. It was this deep conviction upon the part of Paul that formed a most important element in his power.

This abounding and abiding faith was his most striking characteristic, and from the day that he met his Lord beneath that Syrian sky to the very close of life no shade of a shadow of a doubt ever seemed to cross his pathway, and he could truthfully say, "We believe, and therefore speak." So it was with John the beloved: "That which . . . we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the word of life . . . declare we unto you."

This in part was the secret of Moody's great success: he heartily believed what he preached. If you don't half believe yourself, it is difficult to make others believe.

(3), Failure to preach the gospel. It is the *gospel* that is the power of God unto salvation; and if the gospel be not set forth, then is preaching a vain and impotent thing. As well load a modern gun with a cabbage head instead of an armor-piercing projectile and expect therewith to penetrate a steel-clad battleship as to expect to overthrow Satan's kingdom with anything else than the gospel. No matter how talented, cultivated and eloquent the ministry may be, this defect is always fatal. Of this defect several phases may be noted:

(a) In some quarters an emasculated gospel is presented—"another gospel which is not another." For instance, there are those who preach what is commonly called the Fatherhood of God, practically denying the atonement and all correlated doctrines. The utter futility of such preaching is strikingly illustrated by a statement appearing in the *Expository Times* of December, 1898. It appears that in *The Christian World*, some time before, there had appeared a communication from a pastor, headed, "An Anxious Enquiry," in which the writer stated that he had been brought up under the old gospel, but for ten years had been preaching the gospel of the fatherhood; and that while he had crowds to hear him, he had been pained and perplexed to find that there were no conversions, and that this gospel seemed to have no power to save. There were a number of replies. One stated that he had been converted thirty years before under the old gospel, but had discarded it for the new; and while he still believed in the new, its results could not compare

with the old. Another stated that for twenty-three years he had believed in and preached the new gospel, but had found it was a doctrine for Christians alone, but not for converting and saving men. Still another stated that while believing this new doctrine to be true, he too had found it ineffectual, and on the Sabbath before, as an experiment, he had preached the old, and to his astonishment it was followed by an old-fashioned conversion. Still another, T. Rhonda Williams, author of *Belief and Life*, sought to cheer the anxious pastor by assuring him that he was mistaken in looking for such a thing as conversion at all, as the gospel was never intended to do anything of the kind. Do not such statements go far to explain the *dry-rot* of the present-day pulpit? How different from all this the design of the gospel committed to Paul: "To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith that is in me."

It is a well-known fact that the Presbyterian Church in New York is dying, not by inches, but by great leaps and bounds—dying of galloping consumption. The panacea prescribed is the revision, or rather, the rejection of those fundamental doctrines of grace embodied in the Presbyterian standards, whereas the failure to preach these very doctrines is the root of the whole trouble. Facts are stubborn things. There was a time when these same doctrines were preached by men like J. M. Mason, Spencer, Spring, Alexander and W. J. Hoge, and the church flourished; but now, when these same doctrines of grace are banished, the churches are dying! Let us not too hastily congratulate ourselves that there is no disposition in our own church to shelve these doctrines, for indications are not wanting that there are even now undercurrents in the church which, if not checked, will bring it about that an old-fashioned conversion will be indeed out of the fashion and no longer sought after.

(b) Others again convert the pulpit into a lecture platform and the church into an entertainment bureau, where politics, political economy, science, sociology, philosophy, literature, and so forth, are discussed to the exclusion of the gospel, and in some quarters church-goers are as destitute of the gospel as the dwellers in Central Asia. This is true not only of the North, but measurably so of the South as well. At least one instance could

be mentioned of a pastor in Virginia who preaches on every novel that comes out, and from time to time discusses the works of Bulwer, Scott, etc. Nor is our own church free from blame in this matter. A short time since a pastor sent me a half dozen or more handbills, they might be called, or programs of his Sabbath services. In one case the theme of the morning sermon was "The Power and Beauty of Language," and that of the evening, "Worth of Human Nature." Not in a single instance was there a reference even to the Bible, and from these programs one could not infer the existence even of such a book. If the cross was there, it was effectually concealed; and such themes would answer equally well for a Unitarian or a herald of Buddha.

(c) Again, there are numbers of pulpits occupied by men, concerning whose piety and orthodoxy there is no sort of question in which the fundamental doctrines of grace—repentance, the new birth, justification by faith, eternal judgment—these do not form the staple of the preaching. Politics, literature, science, etc., are eschewed as if infected with the plague, and the Bible still holds the place of honor; but it is the Bible as a literary production rather than as the *word of life* that is presented. It is a portfolio of charming bits of history and poetry; its dramatic scenes are unrivalled; its ethics beyond all comparison. It is full of sacred mountains, and sacred valleys, and sacred scenes, and sacred associations, but the great questions of sin and salvation are in the background. The portrait is lost sight of in calling attention to the exquisite tints and the unrivalled setting. It is a preaching *about* religion rather than setting forth the thing itself. That such is the character of much of the preaching of the present-day pulpit there can be no sort of doubt, and if time would permit, incontestible evidence could easily be produced. Contrast this with the statement of Paul concerning the subject-matter of his own preaching, "Testifying repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Here were the two poles about which all his preaching revolved: Repentance, the one great imperative and universal duty; and faith, the only means by which it is to be performed. This was the staple of all his preaching, its warp and woof, and if the pulpit would regain its lost power, it must go back to this same old-fashioned doctrine of ruin by the fall and redemption through Christ.

(4), The failure of the church to consecrate her best talent to this work. No position is more responsible, and none requiring a higher order of talent or more thorough preparation. No one would think for a moment of putting an incompetent man at the head of an army or at the head of a business enterprise simply because he aspired to it, and yet how many are inducted into the sacred office who would be morally certain to wreck any enterprise through sheer lack of capacity and sound judgment. Look at the military and naval academies of the United States. How inexorable their demands, and how rigid the tests! The government wants *men*, the very flower of the land, and it gets them, too! The church should offer the very choicest of her sons for this high and holy work, and yet the cry for laborers is so urgent, and the reluctance upon the part of those qualified so great, that almost any one who offers is accepted; and when men notoriously incompetent and afore doomed to failure come forward to fill the breach, no one has the heart to say them nay. I have only the highest admiration for these volunteers, but just as the church is robbing God in the matter of his tithes or his sacred time, so it is withholding from him her sons; and "having in her flock a male, presumes to offer that which is lame and blind." The gospel is to be intrusted to "faithful (*i. e.*, trustworthy) men, who shall be able to teach others also." They must be "*poimanes laon*," born leaders; and if the church disregards this divine injunction, she must pay the penalty. If the pulpit is to have power, *put men in it*.

(5), Failure to appreciate the supreme importance of the pulpit. Preaching is often made one of the subordinate duties of the ministry instead of its crowning functions. The amount of extra pulpit work required of the modern minister is both phenomenal and appalling. He is expected to be the leader of every movement for the betterment of the race, and not even from the church sociable is he excused from attendance. There are committees to be met, societies to be kept in running order, addresses and lectures to be delivered, receptions to be attended, visits of ceremony, and so on, until the wonder is that he is able to preach at all. Much of this is perhaps unavoidable, but if there is to be any efficiency in the pulpit, there must be time for preparation for it. Even the apostles found it necessary to delegate the work of ministering to the poor to others in order to give themselves

to the ministry of the word and prayer. In a late number of the *Homiletic Review* a plain man is represented as accounting for Paul's success as a preacher in this way: "You folks think the 'Postle Paul was a wonderful man, but I don't. There ain't nothin' wonderful about the success that he had, as you call it. Just look at the facts. He maybe was un uncommon good Christian, but he didn't do nothin' else, accordin' to his own statement. 'This one thing I do.' I say he was narrow-minded. Now look at my wife's preacher. He leads the choir, and is president of the singin' society, and holds office in one or two of our lodges, and he is a brother Mason besides. He takes an interest in the young folks, and goes to the ball matches and football games. Paul wasn't president of nothin', and didn't lead nothin', and didn't do nothin' but be a preacher. I guess I could be a pretty good Christian myself if I put all my time and strength to it. Anyone could, I reckon. If our preachers cared to bring themselves down to that kind of livin', they might have better meetin's. But I reckon they would get no such salary as they do now. Paul didn't get enough salary to keep himself from workin'. He had to do it."

No one can hope to excel as a painter or sculptor, or in any profession indeed, unless he can devote his entire energies to it; and if the pulpit is to be a success, the occupant must adopt as his motto these words of the great apostle, "This one thing I do." Let us bear in mind that preaching is not simply one of the many functions of the ministry, but the prime one. "Go preach" is the way the commission runs, and to fail here is to fail in our mission. Says Dr. Herrick Johnson: "Men of the ministry, do we really believe that Christ is behind this thing? Do we believe that his hand is on all heaven's forces, and earth's too, as he bids us go and preach? Then never shall we be driven or lured to anything that will make it seem as if we were trembling for our pulpit throne. Let us plan for and welcome organized activity, helpful adjunct, Christian endeavor, men's clubs, social pact, help for God's poor, the enthusiasm of comradeship. But in the midst of all these let us set preaching chief, supreme, regnant, and give it our utmost toil, our consuming zeal, our heart's blood, as the heaven ordained agency and instrument by which salvation cometh."

If we find that we cannot raise the dead in thirty minutes, if

the dense population of a great city confronts us with its awful problems and dark despair, and its seething mass of pollution, making the case look desperate for truth and righteousness; if a hostile criticism looks up at us with a conscious authority, threatening to lessen the authority of God's word and to make the pulpit seem "a piece of antiquated lumber" that has had its day and should cease to be, God forbid that we should run to the wish-wash and tow of some modern reformatory device of man to get our case. Let us preach on; that's our business; that's the king's business. We are not going to raise these dead souls thrice dead and buried in the godless worldliness of our modern life; we are not going to pierce this blackness of darkness of city pollution with the radiant beams of transforming day; we are not going to answer the critics and make defense of the truth by *abandoning* preaching, and running to "settlements," and soup kitchens, and carpenter shops, and sanitariums, and bath houses and sacred concerts. The *fact* of preaching is not what's the matter; it may be the *kind* of preaching. And we may have to shrivel our kind to shreds and trample it under our feet and cry to God for another kind before the dead come forth, or the city's stench grows sweet, or the critics join in intelligent and believing acceptance of the word of God as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Scholars as such are not what a seminary is after; not even preaching scholars, nor preaching exegetes, nor preaching apologetes, nor preaching theologians, nor preaching historians. No! Twist those substantives into adjectives, and twist that repeated qualifying adjective into a dominant, pervading substantive, and we have the whole truth about the matter. Scholarly preachers, exegetical preachers, apologetic, theologic, historic preachers, but *preachers* all and always—these are the end, the life, the glory of a theological seminary."

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