

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.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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illustrative of Christian duty and experience, which he was accustomed often to draw upon to great advantage. I never knew a man whose heart seemed more intently fixed upon doing good. Wherever or in whatever circumstances he was placed, it was evident that he was always about his Master's business. It was difficult for him to meet a person, even in the most casual way, and to hold conversation with him on any subject, without dropping at least a word in relation to his higher interests. Nobody, I imagine, that knew him, ever doubted the strength of his faith, or the purity and consistency of his entire character.

Mr. Patterson commanded great attention as an earnest and powerful preacher. In the warm season, he more commonly preached in a tent,—the church edifice being much too small for the accommodation of the multitude who attended on his ministry. He regarded so little his personal appearance, that he used often to preach without his coat; but this was much less at variance with the tastes and habits that prevailed at that day in that part of the country, than those which exist at the present time. His preaching was always simple and plain, but it was always sensible and edifying, and rich in evangelical truth. His voice was loud and commanding, and he sometimes spoke, especially in rebuking the popular vices of the times, as one having authority. He was, however, a son of consolation to Christians, and, indeed, he knew how to give to every one his portion in due season. The results of his preaching were manifestly great, and I doubt not that he is rejoicing in them in a better world.

Yours, forever, in the bonds of the Gospel,

WILLIAM NEILL.

ROBERT HENDERSON, D. D.

1788—1834.

FROM THE REV. R. B. McMULLEN, D. D.

KNOXVILLE, Tenn., March 31, 1857.

Rev. and dear Sir: The history of Dr. Henderson's life, considering the prominent place he held among the ministers of his day, as well as his comparatively recent death, is veiled in no inconsiderable degree of obscurity. After diligent and somewhat extended inquiry in respect to him, the following is the best account that I am able to give you of the leading events of his life, and the more striking traits of his character.

ROBERT HENDERSON was born in Washington County, near Abingdon, Va., on the 31st of May, 1764. Being left an orphan at an early age, and also in destitute circumstances, he received very little education until after the time of his conversion. The following is his own statement:—

“When a boy quite down in my teens, my attention was arrested and fixed to Divine things, in a very unusual and extraordinary way. After having been the subject of an almost indescribable distress for upwards of a year, I at length found peace through the great goodness and mercy of God, and became the subject of a delightful hope. Being filled with an ardent desire to preach the precious Gospel of Jesus, I was much distressed because the way seemed hedged up before me, as I deemed it impossible to obtain such a classical education as I believed to be essential to such an office. In this state of affairs, I tried to banish the thought from my mind for about six months; but finding all efforts of that kind unavail-

ing, I at length gained the permission of my mother,—a poor widow, to make the trial. I undertook the expense of obtaining a classical education without a dollar in hand or in prospect.”

He commenced his classical studies under the tuition of the Rev. Samuel Doak, D. D., who, a little while before, had opened an Academy in Washington County, East Tennessee, then known as Martin Academy, and now as Washington College. Here he pursued and completed his course of study preparatory to entering the ministry; and, in recording the fact, he adds,—“it was not upon charity either.” He was licensed and ordained by the Abingdon Presbytery in or about the year 1788, and took charge of the two Churches of Westminster and Hopewell,—the latter of which was at Dandridge,—the present County seat of Jefferson County, Tenn. He was associated, in the First Presbytery formed in this part of the country, with Blackburn, Carrick, and Ramsey. He continued to minister to the churches just named for more than twenty years; and was then released from them to accept a call from the Churches of Pisgah and Murfrees Spring, in Rutherford County, West of the Cumberland Mountains. Ten years previous to this translation, he had requested a dissolution of the pastoral relation, on the ground that he was left sometimes in actual want from the neglect of his people to supply him with the necessaries of life. The facts in the case having been laid before the Presbytery, that Body charged him with “excessive modesty and unnecessary delicacy in not letting his wants be known;” and charged the churches with “shameful want of public spirit in *neglecting* to inquire into his necessities.” The churches promised to do better, and the Presbytery unanimously advised him to withdraw his petition. He did so, and remained with them more than ten years longer. When he finally left them, their own statement concerning him was as follows;—“We part with our beloved pastor with regret, whose labours we have enjoyed for more than twenty years, and with whom we have lived in bonds of strictest love and union during that period, without the smallest interruption.”

After remaining a short time with the Churches of Pisgah and Murfrees Spring, he left them, and preached a while at Nashville and Franklin, in adjoining Counties, and then returned and spent eight years more with them. He then left them again, and took up his abode at Franklin, where he taught a school, preaching there and in the surrounding country. Through his whole life, he seems to have suffered much from pecuniary embarrassment, and more especially toward its close.

During several of his last years, Dr. Henderson was gradually declining in health,—being alternately of a full habit, and then greatly emaciated. His death, which took place in July, 1834, was noticed by the Presbytery to which he belonged at their next meeting, in a manner that indicated a very high estimate of his talents and character.

Dr. Henderson was twice married—first, to a daughter of the Rev. Hezekiah Balch; and afterwards to a daughter of Major John Hackett, an elder in the Grassy Valley Church. Each of these wives he considered a paragon of excellence; and it is said that he sometimes even made an allusion to one or the other of them in his sermons, when he wished to present the highest idea of female loveliness. He had a large family of children.

He published two volumes of Practical Sermons in 1823, which contain many impressive and stirring thoughts, and bear the impress of a mind of superior mould.

Dr. Henderson was a man of great powers of address. Sometimes he was overwhelmingly solemn; at other times, witty and humorous; and then again, most severe and scathing. His appeals were bold and passionate, and at times awfully grand. He possessed a well nigh matchless power of mimicry, and could accomplish more by voice, countenance, attitude, and gesture, than almost any other man. He was accustomed to lash the vices of the times, as with a whip of scorpions; and yet he often spoiled his most solemn and pungent appeals by some flash of wit, that would bring a smile, if not a broad laugh, over his congregation. He was himself fully aware of this unfortunate propensity, and mourned over it; but it stuck to him as a part of his nature. In the prime of life, he had great reputation, not only as a pungent but a profound preacher; but his eccentricities, particularly that to which I have just referred, no doubt interfered not a little with his usefulness as a Christian minister. His passion for detailing humorous anecdotes seemed to gain strength with advancing years; and perhaps it is due to truth to say that, with the more pious portion of his hearers at least, his later labours were not his most acceptable. For many months before his death, however,—owing to his bodily infirmities, he preached but seldom.

Dr. Henderson was a most earnest and vigorous supporter of Gospel order,—especially as connected with the worship of God. He was, for instance, an uncompromising opponent of Camp-meetings. In a letter written to his very particular friend, Colonel F. A. Ramsey, in 1804, he says,—“I was with Mr. Blackburn at Little River last Saturday, Sabbath, and Monday. If the quantum of religion is to be estimated by noise, and the number of those people who pray very loud in the same circle at the same time, the people there have certainly more religion than all the other people of this country put together. They go incalculably beyond what I think right in these respects.”

No man was more fearless than Dr. Henderson in the discharge of what he believed to be his duty. What Conscience dictated to him must be done,—no matter what obstacles might be in the way. He was invited to deliver a sermon in Nashville on Profane Swearing. This he appointed to do in the Court House,—no house of worship having been erected there at that time. Upon rising in the Judges' place, he saw sitting directly before him two men who were among the most notorious swearers in Tennessee; both of whom had rendered him substantial pecuniary aid in time of need. He afterwards said that worldly policy immediately suggested that he should postpone that subject till another time, lest he should offend those who had so kindly ministered to his necessities; but that Conscience sprang up and said,—“Robert Henderson, do your duty.” He obeyed Conscience; and it is said that his delineations, and lashings, and denunciations, of profane swearers, were absolutely terrific. The subject was exactly suited to his descriptive and pantomimic powers, and he did it the most ample and fearful justice. He sat down feeling that he had satisfied his conscience, but not doubting that he had permanently alienated his friends. The next day they sent for him, and he went with the full expectation of receiving a torrent of abuse; but to his great surprise they met him with the utmost kindness, thanked him for his faithful reproofs, and presented him with a fine suit of clothes as an expression of their respect and gratitude. He received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Greenville College in 1818.

Regretting that I have not more ample means of complying with your request,
I remain your friend and brother;

R. B. McMULLEN.

FROM THE REV. ISAAC ANDERSON, D. D.

MARYVILLE, East Tennessee, January 8, 1849.

Dear Sir: I knew the Rev. Robert Henderson, D. D., concerning whom you inquire, but am apprehensive that my reminiscences of him are not sufficiently extensive to answer the purpose for which you ask them.

Dr. Henderson was gifted with pulpit talents of a high order. He explained the doctrines of the Gospel with great clearness, and enforced its duties with great power. He was an earnest and animated speaker, and his appeals to the hearts and consciences of his hearers were often of the most pungent character. His sermons were frequently two hours, and sometimes three hours, in length; but notwithstanding this, his congregation heard with attention and without weariness. He often introduced into his most solemn discourses such strange comparisons and illustrations, that those accustomed to hear him would involuntarily smile, and sometimes well nigh burst into a laugh. I have seen thousands hanging on his lips, with their eyes fixed intensely upon him, and the tears flowing profusely down their cheeks, and yet a smile playing on almost every face. He administered to vice the most scathing rebukes, which sometimes produced solemn awe, and sometimes bitter resentment. On one occasion, when his audience consisted, as was supposed, of more than two thousand persons assembled in a grove, he saw several rude men laughing and talking at some distance from him, and without a pause the following lines burst from his lips like a clap of thunder—

“Laugh ye profane, and swell and burst,
“With bold impiety,
“Yet shall you live forever cursed,
“And seek in vain to die;”

and then went on as if nothing had taken place. His oddities as a speaker seemed to have the same effect in keeping his hearers from weariness, that a recess commonly has under other speakers. As he often found it necessary to go into the grove, from the house being too small to contain the people who had assembled, he would state to them explicitly what sort of behaviour he considered as becoming a worshipping assembly, and would speak particularly of the great impropriety of wearing their hats; and then would conclude with some such remark as the following—“If, after what I have said, you will not take off your hats, you may nail them on for what I care.” But notwithstanding he abounded in such oddities, he was still eminently useful, and is remembered by the aged Christians of East Tennessee with the most affectionate respect.

Yours truly,

ISAAC ANDERSON.

FROM J. G. M. RAMSEY, M. D.

MECKLENBURG, near Knoxville, Tenn., }
March 26, 1857. }

My dear Sir: The “Annals of the American Pulpit” would certainly be incomplete without some notice of the Rev. Dr. Robert Henderson. He was one of the pioneer heralds of the cross,—an apostle of religion and learning, on the frontiers of both East and West Tennessee; in the early settlement of both which he acted a prominent and very useful part. I have a most distinct recollection of him. He was the bosom friend of my father,—the late Colonel F. A. Ramsey, and a very frequent guest at his house. He was the favourite preacher

of both my parents, and it was the dying request of my sainted mother that her Funeral Sermon should be preached by him, and from a text of her own selection—(Hebrews vi. 18, 19, 20.) This was done, accordingly, at Lebanon Church in 1805, and with another Sermon preached in her bed-room a short time before her death, was published in pamphlet form, and extensively circulated in the Tennessee Churches. Up to 1811,—during all my boyhood, I had frequent opportunities of seeing him and hearing him preach.

Dr. Henderson was not a very learned, nor should I say in the highest sense, a very eloquent, preacher; and yet he was exceedingly methodical, instructive, and I may add, impressive. He adopted the old mode of sermonizing, and divided and subdivided his subject almost *ad infinitum*. He preached extempore, and without even short notes. He was very fluent, self-possessed, and always prepared. The architecture of his pulpit performances was very complete,—even classical—the *lucidus ordo* was perhaps the most prominent trait; but, in the application and improvement of his subject, he was often exhortatory and pathetic, sometimes caustic and denunciatory. In respect to these latter qualities he has had few equals. I have seen at the immense gatherings of earlier times, thousands of his hearers subdued and overwhelmed by his melting pathos. On such occasions, his indescribable earnestness, his emphatic tones, his bold and significant and striking gesticulation, were perfectly irresistible. His preaching was always sure to attract a crowd, and his longest sermons were listened to, not only without the slightest sign of impatience, but generally with the most fixed attention. His prayers were singularly impressive. His utterances were in a subdued, sometimes scarcely an audible, tone; and his whole manner took on an air of reverential solemnity and awe that I have rarely witnessed in any other man. He must have been a strangely constituted person indeed, whatever his character may have been, who could have listened to one of Dr. Henderson's prayers, especially in certain states of feeling, without being moved by it.

In his intercourse with the world, he had a good deal of the old-fashioned ministerial dignity and reserve; but in his own family he was most affectionate; and in the social circle was kind and communicative, and sometimes highly entertaining. On the frontier he had to contend against vice in high places; and there he displayed a spirit that was truly heroic. Against duelling and horse-racing, two of the popular evils of the day, he lifted up his voice like a trumpet; and that too, even when General Jackson was among his hearers. On one occasion, that distinguished citizen, an admirer not more of courage than of Christian consistency, sent him a valuable present, as a token of his grateful respect, for having sternly rebuked these vices in his presence.

Though many years have passed since Dr. Henderson's death, and many more since my opportunities of observing him terminated, he was a man to leave strong impressions, and hence I have great confidence in presenting him to you as he is retained in my memory.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. G. M. RAMSEY.