



A MINISTRY OF FIFTY YEARS.




A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED FEBRUARY 20, 1881.

BEFORE THE FIRST AND SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATIONS OF CARLISLE,

—BY—

REV. CONWAY P. WING, D. D.



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SERMON.



ROM. V. 4: "And experience [worketh] hope."

I THESS. V. 21: "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good."

The knowledge we gain by experience is unquestionably the most reliable, though from necessity it must be confined to a small sphere. The testimony of a large circle of witnesses, and the reasonings we put forth respecting every kind of subject, may of course extend to a much wider range, but what we have seen or heard, felt and subjected to practical experiment must possess the highest certainty.

In the first of the passages I have read for our text, the apostle looked back upon the experience which he and his fellow-Christians had had of life and of the practical power of the gospel as of great value; and he was especially glad to find that the result of that experience was *hope*. Though they had been much troubled, persecuted and afflicted, they had been steadfast, constant and patient; and from all that they had experienced even of such a life, they had not been discouraged, they had not lost confidence in Christ and his promises, and they had not become misanthropic nor desponding of the future of the world. They had brighter hopes for themselves, for the kingdom of Christ, and for the race of man. Great hope had been inspired by their first faith in the gospel; but the experience of many years had given to it greater depth, and steadiness and clearness.

In the second of these passages, the same apostle exhorts his brethren to subject everything, where it was possible, to this test of experience. Just as commercial men were in the habit of subjecting all doubtful money to assay, to some trial by which to ascertain whether it was what it professed to be, so he would have the believer put everything to the test of experience and the word of God, and when anything had been thus proved to be good, it should be held fast. His radicalism was thorough enough to leave nothing untested which bore the stamp of human authority, but this was to be balanced by a conservatism, which would give up nothing proved to be good, however assailed by the clamors of interested or fickle men. The two prominent words in both of these passages are from the same word. The experience of the first was the same as the proof commanded

in the second; and just as we are apt to speak of what is proved as if it were approved, of proved men and proved things as worthy of confidence, so the experience which is spoken of, had rather the sense of what has abode the test, and hence is approved.

I shall at once make an application of these passages to the circumstances in which we are assembled this morning. As has been announced, the present month completes a ministry of fifty years, during forty-five of which the speaker was continuously connected with some pastoral charge; and, although very little has occurred to him personally of an extraordinary character, it may reasonably be supposed that any thoughtful man would probably attain some views of life, some suggestions with reference to the times, and some conclusions on the great questions of the day, which might be worthy of mention. It is with this view that I doubt not I have been invited to address you. I shall not assume that "days should" necessarily have a right to "speak," or that "a multitude of years" must of course give an "understanding of judgment;" I can only claim to have seen more of life than is permitted to most persons; and that what is theory and speculation to many has been to me a matter of experience. In the presence of a congregation in which two-thirds of that ministry has been passed, there are some whose recollections extend nearly if not quite over the whole period in review. I will speak first of what that experience has been, and then of the hope it has inspired.

The year 1831 on which I commenced my ministerial life was an eventful one. I had scarcely entered upon my majority, when my academical and theological course was completed; when, the youngest of all who had ever been commissioned to preach the gospel in our church in that region, I received and accepted a call to preach in an important congregation in that vicinity. It was in a season of great revival. Perhaps never were the churches of our denomination more generally or more powerfully awakened. I entered upon my work with intense zeal, and like every minister who labored with earnestness, I was permitted to share in an abundant blessing. I have always esteemed it one of the greatest favors which Providence has conferred upon me that I was thrown into such circumstances at that time, and that my subsequent ministry was influenced by the deeply earnest men and incidents of that period. For not less than twelve years I lived in an almost continual revival either among my own people or in neighboring congregations. Twice during that period I was transferred to new parochial charges, far apart from each other but still under similar effusions of the divine Spirit, notwithstanding the painful division of the general church which in the mean time took place. In that division I took but little part, for in the entire three Synods which covered that whole region there was

no disagreement. Even when afterwards compelled by a failure in health to sojourn in a Southern state where different affinities prevailed, I mingled freely with both parties and enjoyed their co-operation in a higher form of Christian effort. Never, on any occasion, was my vote or influence given for that sad division; and I have been among the most earnest in promoting the reunion. I have never believed that the differences were serious enough to call for a separation, although so great were the misunderstandings among brethren that perhaps it was inevitable. Certainly God has so overruled what then seemed disastrous, so that the two separated bands wonderfully increased and a church of 182,017 communicants in 1831, has become a church of 574,486 in 1881. Good men often build better than they know, for a higher wisdom directs to results beyond their thought.

In the political world, in 1831, the revolution of July had just taken place in France, and the scarcely less important passage of the Reform Bill in England. It was during the first term of the presidency of General Jackson, and the second year of the reign of William IV. of Great Britain. According to the census of the previous year the population of the United States was nearly 13,000,000. It is now almost four times that number. The centre of population was then in Pennsylvania, it is now near Indianapolis. There were then hardly any settlements west of the Mississippi, and Florida, Michigan and Arkansas were still territories. William Garrison had just established a paper to advocate the abolition of slavery, and Temperance societies had begun to be organized three years before. Letters were charged for conveyance from 6 to 25 cents according to distance, travelling had to be done by stages or by canal boats, and on some rivers by steamboats. Regular trips across the ocean by steam were still deemed impracticable, and the news from Europe was from 20 to 30 days old before it could reach us here. Railroads and telegraphs were unknown among us. Photography, and most of the labor-saving machinery now so common were all in the future. We have lived to see an immense revolution in society effected by these inventions. It is difficult now to imagine the social condition of a people whose agriculture and mechanical employments were nearly all conducted by hand, whose correspondence and travel were by the slow process of the mail coach, whose transportation of freight was by teams and by canals, and to which a neighboring town or county seemed as foreign as now seems London or Paris, or even Pekin. Our very styles of cooking, of furniture, of dress, of writing, of sewing, of knitting, of printing, of making books, of newspapers, and of acquiring knowledge in schools, colleges and seminaries have been essentially changed. Those of us who have witnessed such changes (and there are even now many among us) can scarcely realize the transition.

In the religious world, the changes have been less marked, but they are still very striking. Moral and religious truth must remain essentially the same in every age of the world, and of course the conduct based upon it must ever have the same general character. And yet the applications of truth to the various relations and conditions of men must often have the effect of apparent revolutions. It has for ages been known that every man should love his neighbor as himself, and yet only recently have we seen the proper application of this principle to such evils as slavery, the use of intoxicating drinks, the horrors of heathenism, and offensive war. Christianity has even after nearly 2,000 years, almost as much to do in deepening its influence down among the masses of the people in christian lands, as in extending its sway over the unevangelized portions of the world. And we have witnessed during the past 50 years what we deem more than one of these important applications. There certainly have been some obvious *changes* in the prevalent forms of the religious life. In some instances these are doubtless called for by the temporary forms of unbelief and worldliness which have sprung up in its front. But let any one look over the sermons which were preached and the religious literature which prevailed fifty years since, and he will be struck by the fact, that while the same general truths and the same system of faith were maintained, as at the present time, a much greater prominence was then given to a class of truths now seldom insisted upon. The thorough law work and awful convictions for sin, the feelings of despair and alarm which were characteristic of most conversions; the immediate and decisive evidences which were required before an admission to the Lord's Table; the narrow limits given to christian fellowship between differing individuals and denominations; the almost exclusive prominence then given to those motives to a christian life which were drawn from the rewards and punishments of another world; the large proportions in which the sterner and judicial aspects of the divine character were dwelt upon; the indistinctness with which the human sympathies and nature of Christ were brought forward, and the probability that many even in this life were entirely given up by the Spirit of God—these are traits of the prevailing literature and life of that earlier period. They were perhaps adapted to the peculiar spirit of the times. They were not inconsistent with a joyful and vigorous style of piety. Those who attained to a confidence in their own evidences of grace, were apt to be earnest and self-denying. The discipline of the church was strict and impartially administered, the Sabbath was carefully hallowed, family prayers were required in every household where they were possible; what were called worldly amusements were disallowed, and a light and fictitious literature was generally condemned and kept from the family circle. In more recent times another class of doctrines have

obtained ascendancy, less reliance is placed upon church authority and discipline, and much more is left to the conscience of each private christian.

It was during this period also that the most dangerous assault was made upon the christian Scriptures which the world has ever known. Driven from the ground which had been held by the enemies of the Bible during the early part of this century, that it was never written in the times or by the hands of those whose names its several books bear, the new position has been taken that its writers were uninspired in the proper sense of the word and were worthy of no more confidence than ordinary authors. What are claimed to be the discoveries of science have been very extensively arrayed against the usually received assertions of the Bible. The age of the world and the origin of men, of other animals and of natural productions have especially been claimed to be different from what have been commonly set forth as the Scriptural account. This controversy is still in progress and the faith of many has been shaken. It has led to a more careful investigation of what are the real assertions of Scripture, and what are the mature results of natural science; and there is an evident tendency to the general conclusion that when properly understood these do not disagree. For ourselves we are thoroughly satisfied that this is so. The Bible asserts nothing with respect to our world or this universe before the period of chaos mentioned in the second sentence of its first chapter, and it leaves room for any amount of speculation regarding the process by which man was formed until God made him a living soul. It is contended that all natural elements may be reduced to single atoms and forces, but even then they must require an original cause and mover, and all natural laws must presuppose an intelligent author and director. This Universe is too complicated, too obviously constructed on a wise plan and with a view to benevolent ends, to be supposed possible without a Being like our God. Nor are the facts known and witnessed by us inconsistent with such a control of nature's laws as is implied in his making a special revelation, in sending his Son to redeem man, and in answering the prayers of his people. We have a perfect confidence that every well-established fact of science will be found quite harmonious with every equally well-established assertion of the original Scriptures. Nature and the Bible are both from the same hand and equally worthy of faith when the utterance of each is clear.

And yet some questions are here often asked which very properly come into consideration on an occasion like the present. After these various changes and discussions are there not essential modifications called for to our views of divine truth, of the practice of the church and of the christian life? On this first point especially we are not unfrequently asked, Has not the christian world outgrown its earlier creeds, its systems of

theology, and even the faith given us in the Scriptures? On these points, we are thoroughly persuaded, that never before was the great body of christian men and women more satisfied with, and more under the power of, their religious faith. There have been unquestionably some changes, such as we have mentioned, but they do not affect the essentials of the church's faith. Such changes have taken place in every past age, and must be expected in every future period. May we not e. g. under the bias of some speculative philosophy prevailing at one period give certain interpretations to the Scriptures which at another time under different views, may be seen to be incorrect, and yet may not our reverence for the Scriptures themselves be even greater, when we find them bearing the test of these various trials? May not the more perfect knowledge which we have gained of language and antiquity, and of ancient manuscripts, call for amended texts, and new translations, and new expositions of the word of God, and yet this only show that our love for the words which the Holy Ghost originally used has actually become deeper and firmer? Then as to creeds and systems of theology, there may indeed be less veneration, since they are only the work of men, and must always conform to the word of God, but we see no evidence that the christian world has less esteem for them, than formerly. God's justice and hatred to sin and unlimited power, his sovereignty and discriminating grace, and electing love, may be just as truly articles of faith now as they ever have been, though they may have been made more consistent with general benevolence, a regard for human responsibility, and the activity of the creature. Less prominence may be given to the positive penalties which God sometimes inflicts upon sinners, but there may still be a conviction that as terrible penalties are to be expected both in the present and in the eternal world by means of those natural consequences which immediately follow the commission of sin, in every condition of the soul. If the love of God is made more prominent and the terrors of the Lord are made to consist rather in making men reap as they sow here and hereafter, does it follow that the love is less constraining or the wrath less terrible? In either case the doctrine is essentially the same, our God is a consuming fire, only as it appears to us, the fear of God is brought more into every-day life. If the Sabbath and the discipline of the church are left more to the consciences of men, may we not hope that private conscience and principle are thereby better strengthened? If conversions are less sudden and through less fearful experiences, are we not thrown back more upon the work of christian education, family nurture and Sunday School instruction, and may not these be quite as effective in drawing men to Christ? If God's people are taught to think less of an abstract and devotional piety, have they not been drawn to more practical forms of beneficence, to seek out

the poor at home, to relieve the destitute by giving them habits and opportunities of industry, to devise and act upon more extensive and effectual methods for saving the heathen abroad and the destitute at home, and to contribute millions upon millions in the endowment of literary and theological institutions? If we are more tolerant toward questionable forms of christian profession, have we not gained something in kindness toward human infirmity, in charity toward different classes of real christians, and in hearty appreciation of many who "walk not with us?" We think there is no general desire to change the essential articles of our creeds or our theologies. We know of not one denomination of christians which is inclined to do so. The only proposal which has met with any general favor, is rather to increase the amount of these by the addition of some articles to explain the "historical sense" in which certain creeds and systems are to be received.

It has been thought by some that the authority and power of the ministry has been diminished and that its actual existence in the church is threatened. We are far indeed from believing this. What thoughtful friend of religion could seriously entertain a proposition looking to such a result? Must not every organization have leaders and directors of its energies? And who would think of so essentially nullifying the wisdom and authority of the great Head of the Church? No doubt certain superstitious feelings with reference to the ministry, a relic of times when sacerdotalism was in the ascendant, have ceased to prevail, and we have no regrets on that account. Some subjects too, which once were common topics of discussion in the pulpit, are now almost confined to the periodical or the printed volume. A higher standard of qualification, and a more general sympathy with the common life of men is demanded of those who bear the sacred office. But surely never was the power of the pulpit and of the earnest pastor, in the discussion of divine truth, in correcting popular errors, in rebuking sin, in guiding the efforts of christian benevolence, in leading the worship of the congregation, and in administering the consolations and motives of the religious life, more manifest than at the present hour.

A kindred question has been, whether there is not a demand for liturgical forms in our public worship. It is certainly conceded that a large portion of the worshipers in our public assemblies of the present day are impressed with the importance of giving more solemnity and gravity to the devotions of the sanctuary. Too many allow for them only a few moments of time, and bestow upon them but little thought, while others make them didactic and dependent upon the varying moods of the officiating minister. And hence many would love to see a closer imitation and a frequent use of the admirable forms of confession, adoration, thanksgiving and intercession which were prepared by the fathers of the Reformation and for some time

used by the churches of Geneva, France, Holland and Scotland, but we believe that there never has been a time when our people would more decidedly revolt from any attempt to bind them by a compulsory rule or an unvariable ritual.

In conclusion, I would say, that an advance of years has by no means diminished my confidence in the progress and stability of the church. That my estimate of men and things should in many respects be different now, from what it was fifty years since, need surprise no one, but it was then and still is eminently hopeful. Personally, I have realized quite as much of enjoyment and success as I ever expected. I have seen nothing which should make me unwilling to co-operate heartily with my present fellow-laborers in the ministry, and among the great body of believers. And as to the prospects of the church I believe they are full of brightness. I think I should have to forget not only the prophetic word of God, but many obvious signs of the times, if I did not look forward to the speedy prevalence of the gospel over the whole earth, and among even the most dangerous classes of nominal christendom. No small number of the promises which many refer to the kingdom of Christ in another world, we fully believe are to be fulfilled in this world. A long period and a period of great blessedness we are confident is in reserve for the human race. The mustard seed by which Jesus typified his kingdom, was to grow without interruption until it should fill the earth. The stone cut out of the mountain was to grow until it should become commensurate with the globe. The past may have been a perpetual process by which all things were to be proven, and the good was to be held fast often in the midst of great perplexity and conflict, but such have been the victories of truth, and such are the tokens of a divine presence in the earth, that all right experience works for us a hope which will never make ashamed.



