



BX 7148
.C8T7



CAUSES OF THE DECLINE OF DOCTRINAL PREACHING.

A

S E R M O N ,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

PASTORAL ASSOCIATION OF MASSACHUSETTS,

IN

PARK STREET CHURCH, BOSTON,

MAY 25, 1841.

BY PARSONS COOKE.

SECOND EDITION.

BOSTON:

PRESS OF T. R. MARVIN, 24 CONGRESS STREET.

1841.

S E R M O N.

II TIMOTHY, IV. 3, 4.

FOR THE TIME WILL COME WHEN THEY WILL NOT ENDURE SOUND DOCTRINE; BUT AFTER THEIR OWN LUSTS SHALL THEY HEAP TO THEMSELVES TEACHERS, HAVING ITCHING EARS, AND THEY SHALL TURN AWAY THEIR EARS FROM THE TRUTH, AND SHALL BE TURNED UNTO FABLES.

PAUL here urges Timothy to ply his ministry well while he may; for the time would come when the popular ear would demand what he could not wisely give, and when professing Christians would not endure sound doctrine, but would seek, through a constant change of ministers, the gratification of their lusts of mind, and of a prurient fancy. If the text gives character to an age of gospel hearers, that prefer a kind of preaching addressed to the imagination and the taste, and such as will fall pleasantly upon an itching ear, instead of that which will reach the heart and transform the soul, it is fully applicable to the present age. The taste of the age is told, by the kind of preaching which we know to be the most popular in it. Now what kind of preaching will draw after it the greatest throng of hearers? And how shall one qualify himself to be the most popular preacher? Shall he seek the solid gold, or the glaring tinsel of Christian eloquence? Shall he bathe in the fountains of eternal truth, and bring down the grasp of the strong doctrines upon the heart; or shall he affect the eloquence of words, the gorgeous display of language, the polish of

manner and style, the neatly turned period, the well-told anecdote, the fine spun sentimentalism, or the skilful play upon the passions? Will he not sooner reach his popularity, by sketching scenes in which the hearer's fancy may revel, than by using the bone and sinew of manly thought, to urge home great principles of gospel doctrine? If he shall use his fancy as a sort of kaleidoscope, holding a few fragments of thought in all varieties of reflection and refraction, covering his leanness here and there with a purple patch of poetry; if he shall strive to dazzle the mind when he should impress the heart, and be found gathering flowers to charm, when he should be uttering the momentous and soul-stirring truths of God; if by such means he can convert the house of God into a place of mere amusement, and preach himself, while he should be preaching Christ, he will carry with him the hosannas of the many. *He* has the gift for a popular preacher, and will go through our congregations altogether, as the lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well upon an instrument.

But let him speak as a dying man to dying men; let him address divine truth in naked simplicity, to the wants rather than the tastes of his hearers; let him, when occasion requires, give thorough exhibitions of the great doctrines of grace, and by manifestation of truth, and of the whole truth, commend himself to every man's conscience in the sight of God, and he will soon discover that he is not in the shortest way to popular favor. He will see itching ears averted from him. It will be whispered to him, that such an one is not fed by doctrinal preaching, and is longing for some good practical sermons. Another does not understand the doctrines, and thinks it unprofitable to hear them till he does understand them. Another thinks it a mistake in God to have revealed them. Another thinks it unwise for ministers to preach them. Another has thought that ministers had long ago laid aside

these shocking points of Calvinism, and is astonished to hear them preached in this *enlightened age*. And another *will not* hear them at any rate, and will leave the congregation if the minister continues to harp upon them. Most truly is the text descriptive of the taste of this generation. The time has come when men will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts will accumulate to themselves teachers.

We may therefore find a fit subject of discourse, in *the causes of the prevalent indisposition to endure sound doctrine, or, in other words, the causes of the decline of doctrinal preaching.*

I speak not now of the great and parent cause—human depravity—which is omnipresent in its action, and which in some degree works in both saints and sinners, and often makes the moral vision blemish from beholding the full beams of gospel truth. Even where grace really but feebly exists, there yet lurks much of the loving of darkness rather than light—so that there always will be, more or less of dislike of doctrinal preaching. But our purpose now is, to look for causes of *a decline*, in the public taste for such preaching.

To this decline both ministers and people have contributed. A failure to *preach* sound doctrine, is a cause of forming the public taste against it. And whatever may have occasioned a failure to preach the doctrines, as they should be preached, must be reckoned among the causes of a public disrelish of them.

One cause of the decline may lie, in an unskilful handling of the doctrines by those who have preached them. Some have so connected the gospel doctrines with their metaphysical theories, that their preaching has been unintelligible to the mass of their hearers; and thus they have raised a prejudice against all gospel doctrines. Others have separated the doctrinal from the practical, and presented doctrines as a dry skeleton of theology, rather than

as a body of living and breathing truth. If the public ear had never been abused by the separating of what God has joined together ; if Christian practice had always been inculcated as drawing its main enforcements from the doctrines of grace, and if, when doctrines were preached, they had been preached as the divine and overpowering persuasives to a holy life ; the sickly disrelish of doctrines would have less prevalence. If the gospel must be rent in twain by its preachers, it matters not which of the fragments you retain. They who inculcate the practical and experimental religion without the doctrines, as the basis of experience and practice, and they who present the doctrines like truths in geometry, with no bearings on the conscience, equally contribute to estrange the public taste from them. It is as needful to show the use, as to prove the truth of the doctrines. There must be not a mere brandishing of the sword of the Spirit, to show its gleam and polish, but also a use of its edge and point. We have not done with the preaching of the doctrine of depravity, for instance, till we have brought the hearer with a broken heart to the foot of sovereign mercy. We have not done with the doctrine of the atonement, till we have fixed faith's eye on the Lamb of God, and given a firm seating to the truth, that being bought with a price we are not our own. Nor is God's sovereignty well preached, till the joy of the heart is awoke, that the Lord God Omnipotent reigns. Nor the Trinity, till the hearer is made to see it the ground work of all his hopes, the platform of the most thrilling truths of the gospel. Now so far as this connection between the doctrinal and the practical has been overlooked by preachers, they have contributed to turn away the public taste from doctrinal preaching.

Again, in so far as preachers have distrusted the power of the doctrines, and blenched from an urgent demonstration of their stronger points, they have fostered this vitiating taste. If any have forgotten that these truths are

the products of God's wisdom, and may therefore be safely trusted as the instruments of God's work, to go freely in among the passions and consciences of men—if any have relied on their own prudence and skill, to cut and trim to the caprices of their hearers—if any, instead of coming squarely forward to the work, and laying on with the whole weight of the weapons of our warfare, so massive and keen, are found with soft hand patting the lion's mane and stroking the leviathan's scales, the whole course of their preaching is their testimony against the safety of sound doctrine. If the preacher be afraid of the doctrines, it were strange if the hearer should not take the contagion of his fears. If every sermon should contain an argument to prove it unsafe to preach the doctrines, that would be a most untractable congregation that would not be convinced of it, after having line upon line and precept upon precept. Yet every sermon from which fear excludes the doctrines, is such an argument, and the more convincing because it is a practical argument. Thus the preacher's fears, groundless at first, soon create good grounds to fear.

But what shall he do? If his hearers will not listen to the whole truth, is it not better to give them the part of truth which they will hear, than to drive them off when positive error is preached? That is not so clear. Positive error is not so much worse than negative error. Holding back the truth makes error of what is preached, by throwing it out of joint and proportion. Besides, negative error indulged, will most surely beget positive error. Almost all forms of error have their first spring in minds not preoccupied by sound doctrine. The question then amounts to this—if hearers will not hear us preach the truth, had we not better preach Universalism than drive them off to Universalists? And that answers itself.

But this alternative is presented to our fears oftener than it exists in reality. 'The foolishness of God is wiser than

men. In giving shape to his revelation, he did not make it all very good, *except* in one particular, and in that particular commit the grand mistake of leaving it bare of every thing that could command attention. He is not guilty of a revelation that needs false dealing to gain a hearing. But he has given us one which requires us to renounce the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by **MANIFESTATION OF TRUTH**, commanding ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. If this gospel be from God, though it may be that owing to previous false dealing in a given time and place, men will not endure sound doctrine, no course of preaching *in the long run*, and all other things being equal, will lay as broad and deep a hold on the public mind, in this depraved and shattered world, as that which brings most fully out the spirit of the whole gospel. By heaping to yourselves teachers, and gratifying itching ears, by novel inventions and spiritual empiricism, and by humoring depraved tastes in covering up the offensive doctrines, you may draw delighted throngs around a distorted gospel. But that tide must have its ebb. The mass of mind not being rooted and grounded in the truth, is just prepared to be swept like chaff in another direction, by the next counter-gust of wind. Yea, it is fitted to be carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and the cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive.

A superficial, partial course of preaching, on its first introduction into a community, not preoccupied by sounder views, will usually attract the most hearers. Even Christ's preaching sent some away complaining, "These are hard sayings, who can hear them." And if Christ had kept back some offensive points, he might have retained some hearers which he lost. Yet such preaching as that of Christ and his apostles, will ever be found to have been most honored of God, in attracting a ransomed world

around the cross. The great question for the preacher to settle, is not what will raise the broadest cloud of dust for the moment, but what will best reach the heart and fit it for heaven? a heaven built on the foundation of those truths, which are a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek—not what will make the tallest edifice of wood, hay and stubble, but what will rear the broadest temple of lively stones, built up a spiritual house? It is a reflection on the wisdom of the master-builder, to fear to build after his plan. And the preacher's distrust of the power of divine truth, has averted the taste of many a hearer from sound doctrine.

Indolence of thought, both in preachers and hearers, is another cause of this distaste. It prevents preachers from laying in the resources, for bringing forth things new as well as old on doctrinal themes. The well is deep and they have nothing to draw with, and hence have not that living water. It is much easier for them to skim the surface, and gather the dew, of what is misnamed practical preaching. And for the hearer, doctrinal preaching too much taxes the intellect. He is too indolent to grasp the higher themes of Christian truth. Unless he have acquired from early instruction, or from some sense of the importance of truth, or from an inherent aptitude of mind, or what is more, from the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost—a taste for such subjects, there will be more or less aversion for a kind of preaching, which so taxes the thinking powers. And this indolence of thought is fostered in proportion as preachers shun the doctrines. It better suits an easy, cushioned piety, to sit and be passively borne along by hortatory appeals, and entertained with sparkling illustrations, than to hold the joints and follow the train of a doctrinal argument. And hence many cannot endure sound doctrine.

Another cause may be found in a superficial religious training of the young. Our congregations now are reared

in the Sabbath school. Formerly, Christian parents at least, had a sense of responsibility touching the religious education of their children. Their children went abroad to school for secular education, but the more sacred part of their training was done in the family—the school which God has organized, mainly for this purpose. But the introduction of Sabbath schools has operated to too great an extent, to take off from Christian parents the sense of responsibility before felt, and to throw it upon the Sabbath school teacher. The result is, the religious instruction has gone over a greater surface, and brought the hopes of salvation to many who would not have been reached by other means. Yet what is gained in surface is lost in depth. The aggregate of instruction imparted, may be greater, but the few leading minds who guide the tastes of the rest, have not so deep acquaintance and relish of the doctrines. In the commencement of the Sabbath school enterprise, fewer guards against superficial teaching were used. Sad experience had not then as it has now, taught us the danger of holding the mind in a play around the shell and husk of truth. It was a new thing to teach children the geography, history, botany and zoology of the Bible. And in the zeal created by this novelty, the theology of the Bible was in a measure forgotten. And the results of this omission now begin to be developed, in the tastes of our congregations. The child, reared to superficial thinking, has become a man, rejecting the pith and marrow of the gospel. We had better ministers and better hearers, when the child was put to conning by rote a catechism, which he did not understand, and held upon it till he did understand it, and in understanding it, was put in possession of the higher relations and harmonies of eternal truth.

This source of evil is aggravated by the shallowness of our current literature. If that sort of literature which is most circulated is most read, we must expect the public

taste to be sickly. To simplify and illustrate, and relieve the reader of all burden of thinking, seems to have been the main design of the nursing fathers of the popular mind, in their contributions to our literature. And that popular mind has been made an invalid by its over delicate nursing. It has been approached in its easy chair, its food composed chiefly of simples or vegetable productions. For want of appetite for strong meat, thought has been attenuated and attenuated, and reduced to pulp and nothingness, or whipped into a syllabub of beautiful froth, or served up in fiction as in a sugar plumb—yea, it has been even masticated if not digested lest it should cost the consumer too much effort. Thus he has had his intellectual growth without toiling or spinning. From the child's first book to the mathematician's last, (a book reached by few,) this labor-saving principle has pervaded most of our books of instruction, and marred whatever it has touched. And our books for popular reading have been made with the same design. What now if some one should write and publish a book like the ponderous folios of the Puritan age,—a book in which shall be found solid ingots of thought, lifted from the mine with giant hands, without polish or artificial attraction? What a sensation would the prodigy create! Nay, what ruin would it bring upon the publisher, and what oblivion upon the author!

And the *religious* popular reading has been smitten with the same debility. The process of grinding divinity of other days down into modern use, has been so accommodating to indolence, that comparatively few books for general reading have appeared, which either tax or promote the vigor of thought. There have been honorable exceptions to this remark; but we speak in general terms. Mind has been treated as if its labor were a *malum in se*; and thus crippled by its own inertia. The religious newspaper, the penny pamphlet, the religious novel, the ephemeral biography, the book of travels, have taken the

place in families, which in other days, Flavel, Howe and Baxter filled to great acceptance. And as to volumes of *printed sermons*, the very sight of them invites to drowsiness.

Now when it is borne in mind that the popular taste is adjusted to such a literature, secular and religious ; and that our congregations come from such reading to the hearing of the word, it is no wonder that so many cannot endure sound doctrine.

Then the active and stirring character of the present age aggravates the difficulty. The mind and body of the business world is propelled by steam. And its reading and thinking must be done in great haste. And they who write for such readers and thinkers must so write, that he that runs may read ; they must put their thoughts where one may catch them when passing in a rail-car.

Here, then, is a train of influences most adverse to a preparation of the public mind to receive sound doctrine. In former days the pulpit dispensed its treasures among a people deeply read in the lively oracles, and in the productions of the shining lights of the Puritan age. And the difference is that, between preaching to a congregation of Baxter's readers, and to a congregation of Bulwer's readers.

Then our improvements in the mode of theological education have brought no relief to this difficulty. Theological seminaries have greatly increased the advantages of students, and that in some respects to their disadvantage. They have carried the student's mind over a greater surface, but in too many instances failed to carry it to the needed depth of acquaintance with systematic theology. Formerly it was the custom for theological students to spend most of their time upon the system of theology, and that for want of the means of extensively pursuing the collateral branches. But now the tendency is in the other extreme. The novelty of the pursuit of

the other branches in theological seminaries, gave it an undue popularity. Attainments in biblical literature, church history, sacred rhetoric, and the like, *important in their place and proportion*, have been sought at the expense of weightier matters. A little of every thing has been acquired, in time which ought to have been spent in digging deep and laying the foundations well in the principal thing. Quinctilian's rule, that much reading of a few books, should be preferred to the slight reading of many, has been violated. Much effort has been put forth through the press and other channels—ex-cathedra opinions of our distinguished men and theological professors, have been circulated to magnify the *relative* importance of biblical studies over doctrinal theology. Such representations, coming from such sources, and with the charm of novelty, and untested by experience of their pernicious tendency, created a strong current against such studies as were needed to give thorough acquaintance with the doctrines as a system. And now we are reaping the fruits. It is not uncommon for young men, of the first standing, to come from the seminary, and show, when examined for ordination, a miserable deficiency in what should have been the main branch of their theological studies. While they come forth to be teachers, they have need that one should teach them the very first principles of the oracles of God. They may have rich stores of Greek and Hebrew lore, but they have failed to use those riches as the means of putting forth in plain English, the great truths of the gospel. And that not because they have not been diligent students, nor because they have not had able and laborious instructors in doctrinal departments. But because their labor has been misdirected by the taste and fashion which has been given to the schools. Their mind has been under a train of influences, disparaging doctrinal knowledge and its means. They have been made to feel that a sort of vulgarity and

obsoleteness was attached to this “*dogmatic theology*”—that other departments were more befitting the erudite and finished scholar, and promised more of the furniture of a popular and distinguished preacher. That such a current has been running through our seminaries, I trust none will dispute. But if this be fact, it is no wonder that our congregations are trained to disrelish sound doctrine.

Another mischief has lurked in our seminaries. German literature and German theology, (a muddy pool,) has been let in upon the fountains of our theological science. Because the infidels and pantheists of Germany had excelled in Greek and Hebrew letters, they were welcomed with distinguished honors, and recommended to our sons of the prophets, as fit helpers to the true interpretation of the Bible. German seminaries have been minutely described, and German masters have been magnified in the admiring ears of our young men. And that veneration of talent and learning, which is so powerful an element of the young student’s mind, was carried over and placed upon the masters of the German schools. Our young men have been taught, that though these German masters were many of them rejectors of the divine authority of the Bible, this circumstance was in some sense an advantage, inasmuch as it made them more impartial, and free from sectarian bias. Just as if that obliquity of moral vision, which led themselves *away* from all truth, was just the thing to qualify them to lead others *into* all truth. Here is a surrender of the principle, that a right heart is needful to a right understanding of the Scriptures. And it involves the principle, that the Devil himself, because he has great talents, and no sectarian bias, would be a fit helper to theological studies. Thus, instead of making deep acquaintance with Edwards, Bel-
lamy, and Witherspoon, of our own land, and the masters of Puritan theology in the father land, whose intellects,

inferior to no Germans of this day, were chastened and guided by the Holy Ghost, we have placed our young men at the feet of those Gamaliels who know not whether there be any Holy Ghost. The result of giving such popularity to infidels, and transcendentalists, has been that time has been wasted in threading the mazes of error, and piety has lost its tone in converse with an infidel spirit. The intellectual vision has been blurred by attempts to read and interpret the Bible in the colored twilight of an infidel philosophy. Thus the free use of German literature has, in spite of all its advantages, done much to depress the standard of knowledge in theology, and diminish the amount of clear and sound instruction, coming from our pulpits. There has been more of biblical literature, but less of the soul and spirit of the Bible has been poured out over our congregations. We know perhaps more of the botany and zoology of Palestine, more of the rushes that grow on the banks of the Jordan, but less of the system of salvation that was finished upon Calvary. And the error here has not been, in the use of the means of biblical instruction, but in such a use, and in the use of such means, and in their use beyond the due proportion. These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

Unitarianism, with its nearer affinities to German transcendentalism, cannot live in its atmosphere. It has cultivated German literature till some of its most valued sons have imbibed the spirit, and are glorying in the delirious illusions, of a wretched pantheism. And though the descent from *our* ground would be farther and more difficult, it would be no wonder, if it should be taken by some ; so long as our course of theological study is made to lie through the dreams of pantheistic writers. And we are fairly called upon, in the providence of God, to review and test the wisdom of the policy, which installs an infidel philosophy to give law to the piety of the sons of the

Pilgrims. Can we wonder that the people will not endure sound doctrine, when the ministry studies theology with German spectacles, and walks for years in the fogs of pantheism.

If the object of this converse with the master spirits of pantheism, were to prepare the ministry to combat their delusion, and if our young men were led to the examination of their theories, with that express design, the object of the study would remove the danger. And unless the signs of the times deceive us, there will be occasion enough for public refutation of pantheism. To say nothing of recent developements in this country ; a recent writer from Europe says, that "*pantheism is the great heresy of the nineteenth century.*" The St. Simonians were pantheists. The followers of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen are mostly pantheists. The celebrated Hegel, professor in Berlin, publicly taught pantheism to some thousands of pupils, who have spread this doctrine throughout Germany. Several professors in France maintain the same opinions. To their ranks are now added Messrs. de Lamennais and Strauss. Let Christians of all countries be warned then ! Our real adversary, our great enemy, at the present time, is pantheism ! It threatens us, it besets us on all sides ; it aims to strangle Christianity in its gigantic arms. Against pantheism we must whet our swords and direct our blows ; this is what we have to conquer and destroy." In this posture of things, there seems to be a sad and absurd mistake in our sending our young men to school to pantheistic writers, and that under the impression that such are valuable interpreters of the Bible.

Again, some of the machinery used to promote revivals, has aggravated the evil. Protracted meetings conducted by itinerant evangelists, usually leave an impression unfavorable to doctrinal preaching. The very design of such meetings, got up for the sake of producing a revival,

assumes an erroneous principle in theology. The Arminian placing moral suasion before the work of the Holy Spirit, assumes that that work can be secured by the mere adding of intensity to moral suasion, and he of course is consistent with himself, when he resorts to a protracted meeting as a means of producing a revival. He attaches to human machinery just the power which his theology attaches to it. But the theology of the Bible, while it puts no restrictions upon the frequency of our preaching the gospel in revivals, other than what the health of body and mind require, gives no occasion or countenance for the habit of sending abroad for famous revival preachers, arranging circumstances for scenic effect, and for startling appeals to public curiosity. This in us is bad theology, and bad consistency. It is inculcating error by our practice, and it brings preachers into temptation to *preach* error. The design of the meetings being based on error, can hardly be carried out without preaching error;—that design is, with the aid of animal passions and sympathies, to condense such a power of suasion on the public mind, as will draw in converting influence independently of sovereign grace; and minds acting in that design, though unconsciously, will be next to sure to utter thoughts in their preaching in harmony with it. But the greatest danger of error, lies in the temptation to omit important truth. The time is set in which the work must be done. The preacher's mind is touched by the limits of his time, and it insensibly seizes upon the topics of hortatory address and the instruments of moving the passions, and he cannot wait to see the salvation of God attending the enforcement of the doctrines of the cross. Thus these doctrines are unconsciously, if not by design, kept out of view. And though there be, as sometimes there is, a real work of grace in connection with such meetings, a greater proportion of spurious conversions occur than under ordinary preaching; and those really converted, not having

based their experience on a clear perception of the doctrines of grace, never come to apprehend them clearly, nor to love and encourage the preaching of them ; and churches replenished by them, can ill endure sound doctrines.

Again, an *excess of immediateism* pervading the public mind, is another source of the difficulty. It is very true, that ministers and churches ought to expect and shape their exertions for present results, so far as the nature of the case will admit. But much of the minister's work, consisting in laying foundations for future results, cannot be based on the expectation of present effect. And this work upon foundations, is very essential to the lasting prosperity of the church, and can no more be dispensed with than that which looks immediately to the conversion of sinners. The notion that the present conversion of the hearer, must, in all circumstances, be the immediate and only object of every sermon, is a piece of downright quackery. A missionary among the heathen is there for the conversion of sinners ; but he finds a vast labor to be done before he can bring the motives to conversion to direct and extensive bearing. And much of every minister's work must respect a good to be compassed in future years. We are encouraged to labor, under the promise that he that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall come again bringing his sheaves with him. Our work is compared to that of the husbandman who waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the former and the latter rain. If Paul was sent to plant and Apollos to water, they must both wait awhile before they could reap the harvest.

The overlooking of this plain matter, in the Christian economy, has been disastrous, as affecting the policy as to doctrinal instruction. Preachers have been so anxious to reap at once, that they have declined to sow seed that

would require time to grow. And so they have either sown chaff, that could produce nothing, or else a sort of mushroom seed, that would produce its best in a night. Because direct exhortations and urgent appeals to the passions, seem more immediately related to present results, than plain instruction in Christian doctrines, they have been preferred. But the preference is founded on a great mistake—that of supposing that God has lodged all the quickening and impressive power of divine truth in a few detached texts and illustrations, and withheld it from the great and comprehensive principles of his word. This sickly reliance on a few favorite topics of exhortation, to the exclusion of the doctrines, seems like doing battle with two or three swivels, while we impose silence upon whole broad sides of heavier guns. Nay, if present impression were the only object ; if the gospel ministry had come to its last day ; if the morrow's sun were to pilot in the splendors and the terrors of the judgment day, and if we had our congregations before us for the last time, we could do nothing better than to draw the urgency of our last appeals from the great doctrines of grace. And yet in the conceit, that the doctrines are not suited to present effect, they are suffered by some to repose and rust in the magazine, as antiquated weapons, unsuited to present modes of battle.

But present results are but a small part of the great object of ministerial labor. Those labors which look to future and lasting results, are quite as important as the others ; and this overhaste to do the work all at once, is like an attempt to hasten the growth of a plant by pulling up the blade. It excludes those forms of action and influence, which gradually bring up a church from weakness to broad and deep efficiency. It takes away the needful labor from settling the foundations, and bestows it upon garnishing the cupola, and so leaves the structure to be swept away when the tempest comes. It compels a

church in the choice of a minister, to get one that will build them up in a year. It makes a demand for a sort of preacher and preaching, that will annihilate all obstructions by force of popular and vehement declamation. A new church perhaps is formed ; the outlays are freely made in expectation of speedy and rich results. A preacher is sought for his popularity and immediateism. The circumstances of the case and public expectation, bind him to build the church right up at once. He goes to the work on the false principle, that what is not done immediately is not done at all ; and he proves it true in his own experience. The tide of popularity which the vehemence of his first efforts drew around him has its ebb, and having failed to throw the grasp of the powerful doctrines upon the heart of his hearers, he has lost his hold upon them and is left to emptiness. And while he has failed of his immediate object, he has thrown his hearers farther from the embrace of gospel doctrines, and from being rooted and grounded in the truth.

This view of our subject reveals a leading cause of the fluctuations in the condition of many churches. The overhaste for results has begot a ruinous policy. It has left unused the main part of that instrumentality by which the man of God is thoroughly furnished to every good work, and by which the church is prepared to fulfil her destiny. It has rejected the advantage of having public instruction carried forward on broad principles, and rearing a people with clear and decided views of divine truth. It has intrusted the safety and prosperity of the church upon a frail basis, by placing the main stress upon a novel and attractive manner of preaching, without regard to the substance. Hence the frequent changes. A preacher sought for the novelty of his manner, must soon give place to a more novel successor. And popular preachers, as their peculiar talent thrives best by frequent uprooting and transplanting, are in a favorable field to cultivate a still more popu-

lar manner. But that church that has a use for the whole gospel, and seeks to thrive by laying instruction deep in the public conscience, has a motive to deprecate such changes. Such a church wants a pastor who expects to live and die with them, and who, instead of trimming himself for another market, is preaching as a candidate to the rising generation of his own parish, and forming the minds of his young people, to such a clear and copious reception of the truth, that they may come up around him, with clear minds and sanctified hearts, to such positions of influence as only well instructed Christians can hold. The church and ministry that pursues such a policy, escape those occasions of disastrous change, incident to those churches that live or die with the waxing or waning popularity of their preacher.

Our subject gives us a clue to the reason of that morbid state of the public mind, which makes it tinder to every wandering spark of error. The facility with which men, not deficient in mental capacity, take up the crudest absurdities—from the philosophic moonshine of the Pantheists to the vulgar prophecies and impostures of the Mormonites—is a remarkable feature of the age. And what has caused it? Surely, if we note well the nature of these errors, we shall not consider their ready adoption any compliment to the intelligence of the age; we shall not ascribe them to the march of mind, nor say that our much learning has made us mad. The true cause will doubtless be found in the gradual retrocession of the influence of evangelical doctrines over the mass of mind. It accords with the laws of the human mind, both physical and moral, that these principles of the divine government shall be indispensable to its regulation. A failure to hold vigorously forth the great doctrines of grace, which had begun before the days of Edwards and Whitefield, let in a flood of Arminianism. The next natural step of departure developed Unitarianism. And the diffusion of the

principles and spirit of these two systems, as far as they went, bereft the mind of rudder and compass, and left it the sport of casual winds. And the state of Unitarianism at this moment, affords an affecting illustration of the results of cutting loose from the doctrines of the cross. Smitten with the disease called transcendentalism, many of its leading minds are found wandering about in the ultima thule of error, otherwise called "the latest form of infidelity," and answering most fitly to this description of the prophet—"Stay yourselves and wonder, cry ye out and cry, they are drunken, but not with wine ; they stagger, but not with strong drink : for the Lord hath poured out upon them a spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed their eyes ; their prophets and their rulers, and their seers hath it covered."

The same cause, throwing mind from its moorings, has begotten nameless empirical theories, and principles of benevolent action, which have thrown jars and impediments in the way of Christian benevolence, and which have arrayed a spurious philanthropy in a warfare against the settled institutions of Christianity. Here we see the fruits of being wise above what is written, and of departing from a vigorous use of the great doctrines of grace. Such crudities were never conceived in minds that had been penetrated by the humbling doctrines of the cross. We may contrast the present prevalence of error, with the sway of truth in the palmier days of the New England church, and trace the main deterioration, to the pulpit's failure to give a certain sound, when a faithful enunciation of the doctrines of grace, would have been to the public mind an anchor, sure and steadfast. From generation to generation, the pulpit has made concessions to the spirit and demands of error, and forborne to hold forth those points of God's truth that are offensive to the carnal mind, and expected that a gospel thus shorn of its strength, would still continue to do a gospel's work. But it was

like taking away the bones, muscles, and soul of a man, and continuing the demand of labor from him. It was to be expected that, so far as the public mind should set aside those great principles of God's government over mind, place would be given for those preachers of civil and ecclesiastical anarchy, who are now demanding the prostration of all order, and who, under pretence of a freer and holier gospel, are crying against every gospel institution, "Rase it—rase it to the foundation thereof." God has let in upon us just enough of this thing, to show us where this course of temporizing would end, and then mercifully restrained the remainder, so as to give us opportunity to retrace our steps and to ask for the old paths.

The causes of this decline of doctrinal preaching, are so multiplied, that the remedy must embrace many particulars, and its application is the concern of every minister and Christian; and it is the solemn duty of every one to stand in his lot, and encourage and sustain a more full and earnest inculcation of the strong doctrines of the gospel. I know it is a thankless work. Popular favor is gained by sailing smoothly along the popular currents, and not by counterworking them. Yet Christian ministers are supposed to regard their obligations to God, and to the welfare of a dying world, and when occasion requires, to make a stand for truth against the good pleasure of men, and against all vitiating tendencies of the public mind. God said to his ministry of old, "See, I have set thee over the nations to pluck up and to pull down, and to destroy, to build and to plant." The building of the spiritual temple requires the demolishing of opposing structures. And the planting of the garden of the Lord is not well done, without the plucking up of noxious plants. And though this part of the work should require self-denials, who are we that we should decline it?

When the interests of Christian truth are at stake, it is

no time to take counsel of our fears, and shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God. If the cause of Christ in any place will suffer, by declaring the whole truth as it is in Jesus, let it suffer. He will see to it. If speaking the truth in love, in faithfulness and prayer, will ruin the cause of truth, let it go to ruin. The same means will lift it up again, and bring it forth to a more broad and finished glory.

Princeton Theological Seminary-Speer Library



1 1012 01082 0258

DATE DUE

MAP

GAYLORD

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

