
A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Preaching and Poetry.

By the Rev. P. T. Forsyth, M.A., author of "Religion in Recent Art."

Much is said for the moment on the duties of the Church in connection with the recreation of the people, and the question is, doubtless, important, whether it lies within the Church's sphere or not. There is some room for doubt if the popularity so won may not be too brief, costly, and sterile for spiritual use. But there is a cognate region where the Church might, perhaps, with profit do more than is mostly tried. To purvey for the masses pleasure which, though harmless, has no teaching, and though elevating, has no inspiration in it, may before long be recognised to be one of the duties of the municipality rather than of the Church. But there is a pleasure which has teaching and kindling in it, a delight which does not just leave us in spirit where it found us, which is more than recreative, and which does not so much relax as brace us; or if it do not brace, yet at least, enriches us, and enhances us to ourselves. With pleasure of this kind, surely the Church has something to do. Nothing is far foreign to the Gospel which helps us to acquire our own souls, or elucidate our true spiritual quality. Indeed, it is the divorce of culture with its spaciousness from the power of the cross that has done so much to make culture pagan, and the Gospel either strident or dull. Is there any real reason why the Church, the pulpit, should not do more than heretofore for the pleasure of the soul and the delight that goes with ideas? Is there not some good reason why we should be slow to fritter our Christian energies on the pleasure which stirs no noble memories or hopes, but only strives to make the jaded man forget both to-morrow and to-day? Has the Protestant Church not gone a very long way in the wake of the Roman, in accommodating its methods to men's weakness instead of making demands on the strength which it professes to supply? And what earnest man but knows how deep is George Meredith's truth: "The reason why so many people fall away from God, is because they cling to Him with their weakness rather than with their strength." In a word, does our modern literature not offer us a much neglected opportunity of expounding the old Gospel from new texts?

We are returning with amazing energy to the expository style of preaching. As the Reformation goes on to its completion, it carries us both backward and forward to the rehabilitation of Scripture. The true reform of the Church can only proceed from within. And a reform of the Church from within means a repristination of the charter on which the Church rests. The Church, reviving in power, in taste, in learning, and in social ideas, rediscovers the Bible. Literary science and Christian feeling combine, at a little cost to some traditional views, to make Scripture richer than ever. A growing Christ entails a glowing word. God draws nearer, and the bush flames anew.

If we must be ultimately bound to the Bible, must we be slavishly bound? If our Gospel must rest for its final authority on the principle of Scripture, must every discourse keep the form of starting from a Scriptural text?

May the expository style not be occasionally applied in the interests of Christian truth to the forms of delight with which our modern literature clothes spiritual truth as it follows into the detail of the modern soul the broad principles of Christ? We mean no jugglery with the word Inspiration. We intend no crude identification, in current literary fashion, of the inspiration of to-day with the Inspiration which breathes uniquely for all time through the first literature of a unique Redemption. But it is one Spirit, even if His ancient movement is "once for all." We gladly accept, and deeply need, the aid of those thinkers who pursue into the complexity of the modern conscience the large and eternal ethics of Christ. Might we not make more use of those men of genius who in the subtle and beautiful forms of literary art enshrine the pearls of the Christian soul. Literary feeling is not religion, and literary religion is not Christian piety. But are we overdone with teachers who can make the spiritual principles of the Christian soul come home to the contemporary imagination, who speak especially to the best of the young, and who would deliver us, if we would let them, from the sentimental fancies which make so much religion nauseous to the robuster mind. A sermon of quotations is usually bad, both as art and as Gospel. Might not the pulpit go a long way beyond mere quotation in occasionally interpreting these great poetic interpreters, who, if not inspired as text, are at least inspired as commentary, and who illuminate from the broad margin of modern time the mysteries of the small immortal page?

We have the old Gospel in new lights, the old flame in new lamps. The greatest poetry of the day is Christian poetry. Wordsworth, Tennyson, and the Brownings are not only religious and Christian, but theological. Matthew Arnold, as a poet, is almost persuaded. And the death of Browning made even Swinburne a preacher of immortality. Men like these have depths of rich, moral wisdom, of which our popular teaching stands much in need; and they may have spiritual vision of true Christian

sort, which God has put at our disposal to supplement the dull sense, which is all that many believers attain to, of their Lord. The commentary which brings Christ nearest is, doubtless, our own incommunicable Christian experience. But what we gain in nearness we are apt to lose in size and scope, in depth and grasp. In such regard the poets with whom God has blessed our outward, material, and luxurious age are among the finest of all commentators on Scripture. They might be made the most influential of all teachers (especially for the young) in the contemporary, but yet spiritual aspects of that Christian truth whose wellhead is in Scripture itself. The spirit of Christ is the testimony of poetry as well as of prophecy. Our great poets have in them "something of prophetic strain"—in the higher sense of the word prophetic, which implies looking into the things of Christ no less than speaking them out. Much use might be made of the poets to convert to Christian instruction the current craving for delight; and especially might this be useful to those whose poetic years and tastes are not yet over, but whose interest it is most difficult to bespeak for religious teaching. That teaching is either conventional, and does not attract them, or it is fully adequate, and so beyond them. They have passed from boyhood and girlhood. They begin to feel the suggestions of dawning mind and manhood. They turn, well disposed, to the things that are pure, lovely, and of good report. But the sources of Christian religion do not become really interesting to them. Scripture speaks after all with an archaic accent. A veil is on its face. Christ seems so ancient, so distant, so irrelevant, and the objections to Christ so near, so modern, so intelligible, so plausible. He appears a Christ of yesterday. It is the anti-Christ that is of to day. And they know not what is for ever. They grow indifferent for want of some living mediating spirit between the Christ of the story and the Christ of the age. Mr. Stopford Brooke's admirable *Christ in Modern Life* is an inadequate book, but its many editions prove how real is the need it meets. Why cannot a more evangelical belief do something to meet that need? The class alluded to is often shy of sermons and their makers. And even if they are not very learned they turn away from feeble homilies with a garnish of music, and the general aspect (as a witty bishop puts it) of "a text floating alone in a quantity of soup." They might be saved for religion if they were saved from the impression that it is so very irrelevant. At their age, perhaps, they cannot be expected to have a mature sense of its actuality in personal experience, even if Christians round them made their religion more actual in practice than they do. The young seek a Christ for the age as well as a Christ for the vicissitudes of the individual soul. There may be a precocity, not to say sometimes a conceit, in the demand, but in intelligent quarters it is there. Who would prefer it away? And they would at least be more prejudiced in favour of Christ if He were made to speak to them oftener, as men of piercing genius can make Him speak, in the large language of the age's heart, not in the quaint piety of the past, or its stately inflexible forms. We cannot put a genius in every pulpit, but we might let genius speak through them all the same.

With what is only pretty or sentimental in poetry, the pulpit has not much to do. And yet by using poetry chiefly as illustrative quotation the pulpit too often inflicts on poetry this stigma. It perpetuates the public delusion that poetry and sentiment, poetry and fancy, are the same thing. People learn to think that a poem is a triumph of language, or of imagery, with a thought let in here and there which it is useful to remember and not amiss to quote. But of the large movement of organic thought pervading even a small poem of the true sort, like Wordsworth's Ode to Duty, they have no idea. They have dissociated poetry as completely from the deep and real issues of life in some quarters, as religion has been dissociated from them in others. So that while we have one party asserting in the name of religion that poetry has little to do with the saving of the soul, we have literary people like Matthew Arnold in an extreme reaction, waiting for the coming age when poetry shall be the great guide and sweetener of the soul, and treating the Bible as little more than literature contributory to that end.

Religion is not sentiment; neither is poetry. Nor is religion poetry; nor poetry, religion. Such talk is not surprising in a half-educated age like our own, especially among the "young lions" of art, literature, and rambling religion. But religion and poetry have much in common. They deal seriously and largely with life as a unity—with the soul itself and not with its sides and occupations. They are practical and creative. A poet is a "maker," and religion is the great maker of men. Like poetry it is a spiritual maker, a maker of large minds, and of hearts uplift by sacred sorrows, infinite thoughts, and endless hopes. Such was the heart of Christ—our Man of men. For years He lived upon the literature of His nation as His spiritual food. Can it be quite His will that we should neglect the literature of *our* nation—especially those parts of it that are most redolent of Himself and of a like seriousness in aim? May we not, ought we not, in the name and interests both of our Christianity and our youth, to try to do a little more in the way of correcting by the weight and grandeur of poetic thought the tendency of religion to pretty sentiment, and of making our faith not only a creed or a precept but a real discipline to the moral imagination and the truly public mind?

These words may not improbably be read by people of both views on the question of religion and the nation, of Church and State. But it may be presumed that they only differ as to the best mode in which religion may be made the ruling factor in national affairs, and, at the same time, saved by interests of national dimensions from the close piety of conventicle or sect. Religion needs to be made national no less than the nation needs to be made religious. It is not theology that has made the sects mischievous so much as the severance of faith from the unity and volume of the national soul. Indeed, we should be much depressed if we had not in the progress of theology our chief hope for the erasure of the sects. But it must be a theology which is not unprepared to place itself in tune with the unity of the nation's soul as uttered in its great literature, and especially its great poetry. As religious teachers of every communion, we have a function to the nation as well as to the Church. And we have a unique position and advantage as mediators of both, as interpreters to the people both of their present soul and of their destiny *sub specie eternitatis*. Again we repeat that the literary man is not the priest, that poetry is not the guide of life. But these extreme positions would never have been assumed if the Church had not provoked them by a corresponding extravagance and one-sidedness. The public soul in some of its finest utterances tends away from Christ, chiefly because Christ has been secluded from the public soul. It is in its literature and chiefly in its poetry that the nation's soul finds vent, and unity, and distinctive expression. In its poetry a people is more truly itself than anywhere else, except in its religion. The severance of the popular religion from the national poetry is such a divorce of the nation from its faith as must be fatal if it cannot be healed. The true nationalizing of our religion cannot be effected without a good understanding set up between our literary and our Christian soul, between our spiritual unity as a people in our poetry and our spiritual unity as mankind in Christ. It is a huge blessing that our great poetry is so Christian. It would be a vaster blessing still if we better understood how Christian it is. It would help to prevent us from seeking the nationalizing of religion in falser and less spiritual forms.

There is another point. Though our first-rate literature is Christian, and probably never was so distinctively Christian, it is otherwise with our second and third rate literature. That is either conventional or agnostic in its creed. It is not always aggressively agnostic. It does not always preach Spencer or Strauss, and probably does not care for them. But its task and temper is agnostic. It is humanist at best. It is pagan when it is worse. And at its worst it is pagan, pious, and fashionable, all at once, and goes to church with Becky Sharp in her last saintly years. We do not deny that our current literature is healthy in the main. All we say is, that viewed in its spirit, and from a point distinctively Christian, its drift and temper are agnostic. Its religion, where it is not traditional and clerical, is but humane and philanthropic. It is one of the elegancies of life. We do not even venture to complain that this is so. Perhaps it is well that the depths and realities of religion should be kept out of any but first-class literature. And it may be that the religious novel, like the religious press, is, on the whole, a less healthy thing than the sweet and natural products of pure humanism. Give us Dickens and Besant before either Mrs. Ward or Miss Schreiner still. All we urge is this, that it is a misfortune if the mass of those who, for lack of imaginative power or intellectual vigour, do not read first-class literature are left with the delusion that the attitude of literature to faith is only what their acquaintance with literature would imply, and that all the passion is on the humanist side of life. And this is an error which something might be done to remedy (especially on behalf of the growing class of educated women) if the pulpit would from time to time boldly take an English poem for a text, and expound its spiritual movement from the firm standpoint of the gospel of Christ. We believe it is possible to do this without either wresting the text or forcing the gospel. Of course it calls for skill, and taste, and tact. It requires that the passage be thoroughly mastered, and the preacher saturated with its turns and shades as well as with its ideal unity. It is a task in which some will succeed better than others, just as there are some who excel in the expository treatment of Scripture, while others are at home only in the topical style. We are not alone in this suggestion. One well-known preacher has taken up Dante in this way. Several (though not from the pulpit) have gone through "In Memoriam." Browning has been turned to account. What could be less foreign to the pulpit than the *Letter of Karshish*, for instance, with its realism, its unearthliness, its spell of Christ, and the searching passion of its solemn close. There is much that is serviceable in Wordsworth. Milton waits to be relieved from the undeserved neglect into which his obsolete theology has cast his spiritual splendour and moral depth. It is a style of preaching which ought to be congenial in Scotland, at least, with its power and taste for sustained attention and serious treatment in pulpit themes. Probably enough the chief suspicions and objections may come not from the pulpit, but from the pew, which, if its beliefs ever are of iron, is in its methods as the northern iron and the steel. But what is suggested here might do something to prepare the way for the time when, as in Dante's or in Milton's

day, the literature of passion and the literature of faith shall be either one or at one; when we shall no longer hear complaint, with old Isaac Watts,

> "O why is piety so weak
> And yet the muse so strong";

when faith shall get wings and imagination a conscience; when piety, as in Israel, shall be grand and yet sincere, and poetry in Christ be true to the fact and inspiration of man's central soul.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF 1ST CORINTHIANS.

1 COR. IX. 24–27.

"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? Even so run, that ye may attain. And every man that striveth in the games is temperate in all things. Now they do it to receive a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, as not uncertainly; so fight I, as not beating the air: but I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected" (R.V.).

EXPOSITION.

The thought of the Apostle, expressed first positively in the 19th verse, and then negatively in the 27th, is that the sacrifices which he makes for the preaching of the gospel, he makes that he may himself share in the salvation which he preaches. To illustrate this thought, he borrows a figure from the most exciting spectacle which Greek life presented. Every two years there were celebrated near Corinth the Isthmian games, which included the five exercises of leaping, throwing the discus, racing, boxing, and wrestling. All Greece witnessed these competitions with the warmest interest, and the athlete who was proclaimed the victor received the admiration and homage of the whole nation. It is quite probable that during the two years Paul had passed at Corinth, he had himself witnessed the Isthmian games at least once. Paul makes use here only of the two exercises of racing and boxing.—*Godet.*

"*But one receiveth the prize.*" Not that this is the case in the Christian course, but that each should manifest the same eagerness and sustained effort as if the prize could be given to one only.—*Lias.*

"*Every man that striveth.*" This does not refer to the time when the athlete is already in the lists, but to the months that precede the day of the games, when the competitors lived in sustained exercises, and with special self-denial. For the Christian, whose conflict is not of a day, but of the whole life, abstinence, the condition of progress in sanctification, is an exercise to be renewed daily.—*Godet.*

"*Uncertainly.*" The word has sometimes been taken in the passive sense, "without being seen, remarked," like a runner who is lost in the crowd of other athletes. This would be admissible, if such an expression were not rather pretentious, Paul designating himself as one who attracts attention. It is better to give it the active sense, "without seeing the goal (and consequently the course) clearly; and so, deviating to right and left."—*Godet.*

"*I buffet.*" The word properly means making, by blows, livid marks under the eyes; and thence, generally, any where on the body. It thence passes, naturally, into a metaphorical meaning.—*Ellicott.* See THE EXPOSITORY TIMES for August 1890, p. 243.

"*My body.*" This is the adversary on whom the blows are to fall. He does not say his *flesh*, as if he wished here to lay stress on the characteristic of sin in the body; no, it is the organism itself that he curbs and bends, to make it a pliable instrument of the spirit.—*Godet.*

"*Bring it into bondage,*" or, lead it in bondage. As the victor led the vanquished round the arena, amid the plaudits of the spectators, so Paul, after breaking the opposition of his body, leads it like a submissive servant before the face of the world in the labours of the apostleship.—*Godet.*

"*Rejected.*" The word is not so much *reprobus* (vulgate, Authorised Version "a castaway") as *reprobatus*,—"rejected," that is as unworthy of the crown and the prize. The doctrinal deduction thus becomes, to some extent, modified. Still the serious fact remains that the Apostle had before him the possibility of losing that which he was daily preaching to others. As yet he counted not himself to have attained (Phil. iii. 12); that blessed assurance was for the closing period of a faithful life (2 Tim. iv. 7).—*Ellicott.*

By the two illustrations of runners and boxers, he shows the necessity for special exertion, and also for unusual self-denial.—*Edwards.*