

Great Preachers and Great Hearers.

BY R. W. DALE, LL.D.

PEOPLE often forget that it takes two to make an effective sermon—the preacher and the hearer. A few years ago, after a minister had been preaching in a Wesleyan chapel not far from my house, one of the older officials of the circuit began to talk to him of the glories of the past generation, and said with some fervour, “Ah, sir, there were some great preachers then.” “Yes,” was the reply of the minister, who, perhaps, felt just a touch of human irritation on listening to the remark, “yes, and there were great hearers then.” The answer was a wise and a just one. If preachers form and discipline their congregations, it is equally true that congregations form and discipline their preachers; and even those men who have a rigid strength which refuses to be bent and moulded by influences alien to their ideal excellence, and to their conception of what their fidelity to their awful trust demands—even they find their work limited and conditioned by their people. For example, if a minister finds that his congregation, or a large majority of his congregation, are impatient of intellectual effort in order to master Christian truth, are unwilling, or perhaps (poor people!) are unable to bear the strain of continuous thinking for ten minutes at a time—if they become restless, or look at him with blank faces which show that he has lost their interest when he is giving them an exact and careful account of the movement of thought in some great passage of Paul’s epistles, or is endeavouring to define with accuracy some great Christian doctrine, he will be discouraged. He may be strong enough to resist the discouragement and to give them the best teaching he can, whether they want to be taught or not; but his very eagerness to secure the highest moral and spiritual ends of his ministry may, under such conditions, lead him to the conclusion that to do his congregation any real religious good he must always be simple and must never make any demands on their intellect. It is the people quite as much as the ministers who are responsible for whatever want of intellectual vigour may be charged on the modern pulpit. It is vain to hope for the return in our time of the great days when a preacher could take an hour and a-half, or two hours, or even three, to build up a massive exposition and demonstration of one or other of the great doctrines of the Christian faith, working into its solid foundations text after text, each of them carefully explained, and the use of each carefully defended, then defining with painstaking accuracy the terms in which the doctrine

was stated in one of the great confessions, or was stated afresh by himself; then distinguishing between the true definition and those defective forms of stating the truth by which well-meaning but unwary souls had been led astray; then putting in position on the summit of his granite walls his heaviest artillery of Scripture and of logic, and directing its thunder against churches and theologians by which the truth had been openly denied. It is vain, I say, to hope for the return of these great days. Even those loyal and devout hearts among us that still cherish veneration for the sanctity and faith and courage and fortitude of Puritanism would never consent to listen to Puritan preachers, and perhaps some of them forget that the moral and spiritual vigour of Puritanism came in part, came largely, from the intellectual vigour with which Puritanism dealt with Christian truth. People now insist that the sermon should not exceed thirty minutes “with a leaning to mercy”. That was often the time that the great preachers spent on the preliminary considerations through which it was necessary to approach their subject. They spent another thirty minutes in deductions and practical applications when they had finished with it. Some well-disciplined congregations concede forty minutes, or even forty-five; on special occasions they concede an hour, and then they think themselves generous. But the larger and ampler treatment of the great subjects of our ministry can be rarely, if ever, attempted. If we extend the treatment of one subject over two or three sermons, then the congregation think themselves hardly dealt with; then they are required to recall to their memory on one Sunday what was said on the Sunday before, perhaps two or three Sundays before, and the effort is too much for many of them. Well, we must do what we can. We may at least endeavour to avoid that vagueness of thought which encourages intellectual indolence; we may at least refuse to be satisfied with that mere pious sentiment which has no root or support in strong and clear conviction. We may at least resolve that the knowledge of grown men and women shall pass beyond those simple truths, and those simple aspects of simple truths, which might serve for the spiritual outfit of a child. We may at least resolve that we will do our best to protect our hearers from what Coleridge describes as those numerous artifices by which austere truths are softened down into palatable falsehoods, and those other artifices, not less numerous, by which truths, not austere, but full of moral and spiritual

energy, of joy and boundless hope, are reduced to an ineffective feebleness. And yet it depends on our congregations whether even these things are possible. There can be no teaching by the preacher unless the congregation consents to make an effort to learn. You can help your minister by making that effort. And you will soon find your reward. There is incomparable intellectual interest as well as incomparable spiritual power in the contents of the Christian Gospel, and the heart is never likely to feel the fulness of its power if the intellect is not fascinated by its interest. Do your part, and you will find that the preacher will do his part better every year. Let him see that you are interested in his endeavours to put you in

possession of the great and real ideas of the Old and New Testament, and that your mind works with his when he is illustrating and establishing some great Christian doctrine. Talk to him about these great themes. Tell him when he has made some great subject clearer to you than it was before, when he has invested with fresh and deeper interest and fuller meaning some familiar story in Holy Scripture, or some familiar text. Tell him, too, what still remains obscure, what he has left unexplained; let him know that you not only move to the very edge and outermost boundary of his own thought, but are looking beyond, and would be glad to be led further.

Sunday School.

The International Lessons.

MONTHLY EXAMINATIONS.

QUESTIONS will be set monthly on the International Lessons. It is intended that they should serve as an Examination of each month's work after it is finished. Accordingly, the questions will be set upon the lessons of the previous month. The name, age, and address of the boy or girl must accompany the answers each time they are sent. Prizes will be given to successful Candidates every month.

EXAMINER'S REPORT FOR NOVEMBER.

1. JOHN K. CHALMERS, 4 Esslemont Avenue, Aberdeen.
2. LIZZIE J. MILNE, 32 Belvidere Street, Aberdeen.

To these Candidates Prizes have been sent by the Publisher.

Next in Order of Merit stand A. G. (Bothwell), W. C. E. (Aberdeen), J. M. S. (Perth).

EXAMINATION ON THE LESSONS FOR NOVEMBER.

(Answers must be received by December 14.)

I.

Age under eighteen.

1. Give your opinion of the character of Absalom.
2. How did word come to David of Absalom's death?
3. What is meant by the "Sons of Belial"; and what does David say about them?
4. Why was Solomon's choice a good one?

II.

Age under thirteen.

1. How did Absalom gain the hearts of the people?
2. Who was Ahimaaz?
3. What do you think of Solomon's choice?

The International Lessons for December.

SHORT NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

I.

December 1.—1 Kings viii. 54-63.

It will not be easy to make this lesson interesting to young children. Not that it is hard to understand, but they will feel a lack of definiteness about it.

Verse 56.—"By the hand of Moses" is a common Hebrew expression, simply meaning "by". See verse 53.

Verse 59.—"Nigh unto the Lord," that He may keep them in remembrance.

Verse 61.—"Perfect." A startling word. It means "entirely, undividedly given to the Lord". The Hebrew word is *shalam*, and from the same root come Islam, the religion of "entire submission"; and Moslem, "the religious man as entirely devoted," words used by Mohammedans.

Verse 63.—The number of victims is enormous. But it was a great occasion—the dedicating of the Temple. Practically, the whole nation gathered to it, and in that climate they could do so easily, all they needed being food. So Solomon made a great feast for them, a feast which lasted seven days. In other words, he provided food for them all these days. Only the fat and some internal parts were, at a peace-offering, consumed on the altar.

This is not, strictly speaking, the Dedication of the Temple. It is the Benediction. Benediction means "speaking well" upon one. We often hear it called the "Blessing". The children are familiar with the minister's benediction: let them repeat it. Refer them to two beautiful benedictions—one near the beginning of the Bible (Num. vi. 22-27), and one near the end (the last two verses of Jude).