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# Teaching the Bible in a Time of Emphasis upon Democratic Ideals

FRED MERRIFIELD, B.D.\*

During the war I have been thrown into contact with numbers of business and professional men who were helping in the speaking campaigns conducted by the Government. Very frequently these men would ask me what was my line of work. When I promptly told them, they would almost invariably take a second look at me, ejaculate a mild and surprised, "Oh!" and close the conversation—if I allowed them to do so. They could not understand what red blood had to do with the Bible, or the Bible with modern life.

I know how these men would answer the question implied in our present topic. And I think I know some biblical instructors whose thought and work will not be changed by a hair's breadth after all the soul-stirring events of the past months. Their theories compel them to live in the sacred past. It will matter little to them what happens to the world in the next few critical years.

But most of us feel as if we had lived ages since August 1914. Then the phrase "Democratic Ideals" stood largely for a comfortable theory of government. Today, since we have seen these ideals challenged, even threatened with extinction, by such lower and supposedly outgrown types of civilization as extreme autocracy and extreme anarchy—today, I say, we have learned to cherish these ideals as our very life. When we saw the lives of millions of our fellow-beings grandly given to preserve this same treasure for humanity; and especially when, in turn, we found our own lives, with all that they meant to us, past and future, cast thoughtfully, fiercely, gladly, upon this same great world-altar of sacrifice, then we began to realize what all this struggle meant and how precious were the interests involved. Now when we say "Democracy" it is as when we stand at salute before the Flag, or at worship before Almighty God. We have entered upon a new world of experience. Life, God, our work, our hopes for men—all things are new!

## I. NEED OF A CLEARER CONCEPTION OF OUR TASK.

What have we been doing in these years that are gone? With a third of the human race nominally in the Christian fold, did we yet produce so few leaders that the world could get away from us and fall into ruin before our very eyes? Whatever may be said for the persistent wickedness of militaristic Germany, Christianity must also face indictment for her blindness and negligence, for ever allowing such a false and pernicious system to gain so great a hold upon the world. If the

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present chaotic state of the world is not a clarion call from high heaven to every man and woman of us to measure each his work by the tragedies and pleas of this heart-breaking hour, then there are no voices of God in human affairs. As the spirit of America at war is different from the shortsighted, complacent spirit which prevailed here prior to the war, so must we Christians set ourselves as an undivided army to lead the world up to the heights of God.

Our main task—can we not see it?—is not to teach “Biblical Literature,” the mere content of the Testaments, Old and New, just sixty-six books, no more and no less. It is not the implanting of a thousand years of biblical history in the retentive minds of our students, nor is it to give them an appreciation of the literature of the Bible, rich as that is. Like China, we have lived too largely in the Past, a Palestinian Past, almost oblivious to the trend of modern civilization. We have dreamed that the comparatively simple solutions there offered for the problems of those days might and must somehow be equally applicable to the life of today. How far away most of us have lived from the seething and apparently irreligious masses of men that it required a war of unprecedented horrors and the loss of twenty millions of lives to arouse us to a nobler and more serious conception of our real mission.

Can we see it now? We are to live near the actual world of men and women the rest of our days. All our messages and methods must be earnestly examined with reference to the needs of this workaday world which ultimately we hope to serve, especially through the lives of our students. If ever we allow ourselves or our students to forget this wide mission we fail miserably. The intensity and the patience with which we labor will also be in proportion to our appreciation of actual social conditions in all parts of the world.

We are, first, last, and always, *interpreters of religious ideals*. No life, however great or humble, no experience, however remote or however recent, lies outside the realm in which we serve. We are to take life as it is and reveal its fundamentally spiritual significance. It is not by chance that we do this chiefly through literature, for in these written treasures there have been preserved for the world some (by no means all) of the most uplifting experiences which the race has known.

Ours is truly a dramatic task because it is so sincerely, deeply human. We are permitted to enter the shrines of many lives, sympathetically sharing in the joys and sorrows, the hopes and doubts, they have known; and then it is our chief mission to interpret these experiences helpfully for the sake of others whom we find passing through the same difficulties and in great need of the victorious conclusions which have been achieved in these preceding lives. In this way the Present learns from the Past, saves itself from many a needless waste of time and energy, and is the better able to devote all its accumulating power in the direction of further world progress. We are time-savers, life-savers, then—experts in the direction of moral energy—if we really fulfil our mission. We deal primarily with great universal experiences because

we hope to win the world to the best its own sons of every land and age have achieved at great cost ; and we know by experience that the human heart everywhere needs, and, in many cases, hungers for, the consolations and good cheer which this story of common life holds for them.

We are providentially living in a time which challenges all the noblest in us to find expression. Death and devastation are everywhere about us ; we must point the way to life in the midst of death. A large part of the world seems lost in one mad scramble for selfish power ; we stand with the forces which build for better things, the stabilizing of life in the years just before us. Men call us dreamers and laugh at our ideals, but ideals—even when crucified, dead and buried—invariably rise to rule the world. So God ordains, and we work not in vain if we follow the God of history.

We must give this larger hope to the youth under our care, we must put the fight for right into their lives. Very reverently be it said : we are commissioned to be creators of spiritual life, educators of divine possibilities and powers in these young lives that face us day after day. How often we forget the infinite possibilities into which they may rise if given the right encouragement in these critical college days ! Woe betide the instructor who misses his high calling, who is not a quickening spirit. He who moves about the classroom as a mere reminiscent curator of a biblical museum is distinctly out of place. He is a double sinner, sinning against the God of live people and against the living class itself.

Through the literary and historical studies which we conduct, it is our privilege to inspire our students with a great-hearted, warm-hearted faith in all humanity ; with an irrepressible desire to share the lives of all peoples of all ages, but especially of those who are their contemporaries. What a different look comes into a student's face when he learns that he may in a very real sense exchange helpful experiences with a large proportion of the 1,500,000,000 folk who make up the great family of God in our little world.

With such an abundance of world experience at our disposal we should be able to minister in most direct and vital fashion to the needs of this great hour. The cause of Freedom, of Justice, of Peace, of Brotherhood, is our cause. For this purpose we have been trained. Our message of practical idealism fits the needs of the Greater Democracy we see before us. Every fibre of our beings should thrill in response to such a call. The decades of opportunity just before us should make us appreciate our mission as never before.

## II THE NEED OF SUITABLE SELECTIONS OF BIBLICAL MATERIAL.

One task, in the furtherance of our work, which has waited very much too long for fulfilment, has been that of providing for our classes more suitable selections of religious literature. In spite of our training in modern thought we have hardly realized how greatly our choice of

material has been influenced by the ancient dogma of literal inspiration. One instructor said to me not long since, "I teach my students that all the religion they will need to know is contained within the covers of the Bible; especially the New Testament." If our co-worker is right then the Jewish and Christian fathers did in some unaccountable way discover at the beginning of our era that God had ceased speaking in the lives of men. He had nothing more to say after 100 or at most 200 A. D. Because they felt they had enough truth to live on, they were sure future generations ought to be satisfied likewise.

Of course experience has taught us better things than this. Instead of starting with a limited set of messages to be taught verbatim to the student, we are learning that we must first consider the day in which we live, the particular needs of that day, and the immediate tasks for which we expect the student to fit himself. Under the intense, even desperate, pressure of this post-war era, for instance, we certainly cannot fall back even upon the methods and materials which seemed all right for a time which we wrongfully regarded as peaceful, almost millennial.

We shall be at war for democratic ideals for many years to come. We must realize the strength of the autocratic and other degenerating forces opposed to us. Where now shall we turn to find inspiration with which to equip our young people for so strenuous a warfare? Shall we give up our biblical writings entirely, as belonging to a far distant and undemocratic age? Too many warriors of the faith have renewed their strength at these springs of life to make that a wise thing to do. We must simply discriminate between the useful and the outgrown in literature just as our forefathers did in selecting the present sixty-six books.

Common experience and historical study have come to our aid. We find that people have unconsciously been making up their shorter Bibles from the Psalms, the Gospels, some of the Prophets, the Epistles, and so on. How few today feel bound by dogmatic conviction to use consistently and uniformly the whole Bible! And even where the theory holds, actual usage generally tends in the other direction. Until we separate the pure gold of Scripture from the concealing and forbidding dross which so often leads young people to pronounce the Bible as "beyond comprehension" and "hopelessly dry," we shall have failed in one of our plainest duties. To put an entire Bible or Testament into the hands of an untrained youth, knowing as we do how mixed in quality and confusing in its order and its combinations of sources it is,—this is no longer a sign of good judgment, however pious it may look from a popular point of view.

Let numerous and varied collections of the best biblical passages be made; those especially which have been tried by fire, those from which our present democratic ideals have so largely sprung, those which represent natural and deeply human experience expressed as it usually is in the language of truest passion and beauty and with absolute sincerity.

We need such a Bible today. Such a book would in time attract world-wide attention and create a new revival of interest in things religious.

As far as possible the language of democracy would prevail in this Book. No autocratic God would be found here with his arbitrary and oftentimes unethical decrees from above. Instead, the Father of men would speak to us, and readers would be drawn to him as the prodigal turned instinctively home again. Jesus, too, would appear here in the untarnished beauty of his original nature. His words and life would touch all the deeper chords of our beings if once separated from the well-meaning, but really unfortunate accretions of the gospel editors. So, too, the rich ethical teachings of the Epistles; they assume entirely new meaning if presented attractively, quite apart from the heavy theology of Paul and the controversial arguments of the later works. A Bible which fitted the scientific and democratic day in which we now live, would be like a new voice of God coming across the centuries. The fire and loyalty of the great Prophets, the yearnings and consecrations of Israel's singers, and the deep consciousness of God's presence as well as the joy of human service which ring in the great words of Jesus and Paul would be born in us again.

### III. THE USE OF MODERN RELIGIOUS LITERATURE.

If it is true that the richest religious materials the world has yet known are imbedded in the Old and New Testaments; if it is true that we are largely indebted to this literature for our present-day democratic principles, it is also true that these century-old truths must receive expansion and broader application if they are to fit our day and its growing demands. Any non-biblical literature, and especially that of modern origin, which can help us in this work ought properly to be utilized side by side with the so-called "biblical" books which we ordinarily handle exclusively. Any writing that is uplifting, inspiring, that draws us toward God and deepens our sense of duty belongs in our Bible, our great ever-growing Book of Religion. Instead of calling it a sin thus to classify ancient and modern biblical and non-biblical writings together, it is utterly wrong not to do so if God can speak to us nowadays in literature—the life-experiences of men—as he did in the olden days.

Our better educated men and women find untold help in reading our modern poets, for instance. Surely no one need apologize for bowing in humble prayer after reading "In Memoriam," or for rising with new conviction of the value of life after reading "Saul," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Crossing the Bar," "Lines at Tintern Abbey," "A Forest Hymn," "The Eternal Goodness," "A Psalm of Life," or "The Choir Invisible." It is identically the same uplift we get from Psalm and Parable, Proverb and Sermon in our accustomed books. *There is just one adequate test for "biblical literature" today: not the apostolic test of gold, but the test of life,—godlike life, actual inspiration of conduct.*

It is truly pathetic sometimes to see how we try to stretch un-

dreamed-of meanings out of the limited materials of our Testaments to cover the great multitude of modern needs at our church services, our funerals and weddings, and upon state occasions. Why should it be deemed sacrilege if we *can* find and use a voice of God as echoed in a production of our own time?

During this present war we have already seen signs of the development of a noble religious literature of a distinctly twentieth century type. It rings with the clash of war and yet speaks of the calm of a great confidence in God and man. It believes in defending life and human interests, and never hesitates to follow Duty beyond the gates of Death. It cares little for conventions and forms, but it never loses touch with the God of a whole, rounded life. And we have only begun to hear the prophetic and psalmist voices which have been aroused the world around by the tragedies and yearnings of these awful years. Why should we not lay hold of these fragments of the Divine for our young people? They take more naturally to such recent experiences than to these of ancient times. Why not lead back into the old from the new, and so teach them that truth is timeless and that all life struggles and all victories belong to them because of our common humanity?

To say that this is trespassing upon the quadrangles of the English Department signifies little. Our colleagues would no doubt welcome the emphasis we put upon these modern works; for the English instructors cannot, as a rule, give the time to handle literature from the religious point of view should they so desire. Nor is it any obstacle to suggest that in this case we should be obliged to change the title of our division of labor from "Biblical Literature" to that of "Religious History and Literature." New wine calls for new wine bottles. We must follow experience, regardless of customs or we become untrue to the Guide of Truth who goes before us.

As long as it is our clear task to help prepare young people for the struggle with to-day's problems, we must place the emphasis where it belongs. Means and methods of every legitimate sort should be employed to this one end even at the sacrifice of some of our cherished beliefs and customs. The battle is on. As we fought and won in France, so must we do here. The struggle to enthrone Democracy is not one whit less worthy and strenuous than the struggle to dethrone Autocracy. And, we must not forget, Democracy will never be safe, constructive, and permanent until it is wholly permeated with that spirit of human consideration and reverence for the holy which we call the Spirit of God.