

[R644 : page 7]

READING THE BIBLE.

The late Dr. Maitland, in an ingenious essay on impediments to the right understanding of the Scripture, introduces a man of business, who, with a sort of self-satisfaction, apologizes for his own shortcomings thus: "I am a plain Christian, worried with the cares of my business and family, and glad to catch half an hour to read my Bible. I must make the most of it. I must employ the little leisure I can match at intervals in devotional reading, and my object must be my own edification."

The reply made to him is: "To be sure you must read for your edification, but what is the distinction which you seem to draw between reading for your edification and reading with a view to learn all that God offers to teach?"

He answers: "Why, I mean that I must read the Scriptures with application to myself, to my own circumstances, to my own soul. If I come to a part which I do not understand, I have not time and learning to investigate its meaning; and when I attempt it I often find that the time which should have been employed in devotion has been wasted in turning over commentators, from whom, after all, I get, perhaps, no satisfaction as to the real meaning of the passage, though some of the more pious and practical among them may assist me in applying it to myself. Now, if I do not thus derive a personal application to myself, what use is there in my reading such a portion of Scripture at all?"

"The rejoinder which follows – and it [R644 : page 8] expresses the one great lesson we are anxious to impress – is this: "To speak plainly, I do not know that with your ideas there is much use in your reading such a part of Scripture, because, as soon as you have found that you cannot understand it, or make it apply to

yourself as it stands, you set to work to make some meaning, which you do not yourself believe to be the real meaning, and to fetch out some doctrine or precept which the text does not contain; and this habit is so prejudicial that I believe it would be better for you only to read such parts as you cannot doubt do really apply to your own circumstances. It is not likely that you will reap any benefit from reading the rest of the Scriptures sufficient to counterbalance the injury which must arise from the habit of setting aside all inquiry as to the real meaning of the Word of God, and fancying that any imaginations of your own are more profitable than the mind of the Spirit."

If this method of treating Scripture, so graphically described, be common, and we fear it is, we may cease to wonder that so much of God's Word is unintelligible to the general reader. Any book, thus handled, must necessarily become so; for, the moment we allow ourselves to read with any other aim than to understand the meaning of the writer, we darken that which is before us so thoroughly that it is all but hopeless to expect it can ever become clear.

In reading Scripture, we are bound, and that most emphatically – no less by reverence for its Author than by integrity of heart, – to ask but one question: "What does it say?" And if, to get this question answered, it is necessary to ascertain, not only what the precise words are, but when and to whom they were spoken, to observe the connection in which they stand, and to note the circumstances under which they were uttered, we must neither grudge the labor that may be involved, nor imagine that we can evade its necessity by indulging in our own fancies, however ingenious they may be, or by prolonging meditation, however devout. When the true meaning of a passage is made out, and not

till then, shall we be able to apply it with simplicity of purpose, or receive and realize as living words that which has been written.

In doing this, a thoughtful and intelligent reader will gladly avail himself of such helps as he can obtain. The Bible always takes for granted that readers are possessed of common sense – that they will give the same kind and amount of attention to inspired statements that they are in the habit of bestowing on ordinary writings; and that they will read its communications continuously, and as a whole.

No one who has not tried the experiment can imagine what a flood of light falls upon a Pauline Epistle when it is read through at one sitting, with quickened attention to its scope and purpose. In no other way can we perceive its lights and shadows, its tone and perspective, or get above the one-sided interpretations which are continually thrust upon us. And that which is true of the Epistles is true also in relation to other parts of the Divine Record.

Instead of treating Scripture in this way – supplicating the Holy Spirit for a right state of heart, and in harmony with that supplication struggling manfully against the impulses of prejudice and pride – too many never read the Bible at all, excepting under the limitations of chapter and verse; and thus, for the most part, with an utter disregard of the connection subsisting between that which they peruse and that which they omit. Prayer for Divine light seems to such persons all that is required in order to arrive at truth, however idle, or uncandid, or bigoted they may be.

In relation to private reading of the Word, we say deliberately that, if we would be honest before God, if we would shrink from sacrificing a true thought, in order to gain thereby the use of mere words in favor of some doctrine or practice to which they were never intended to apply, we shall feel that nothing can justify the use of any portion of God's Word apart from the consideration of

the context, or in a sense different from that which it bears in the portion of the record from which it is taken.

It is this carelessness about Truth in the application of Scripture that has made "the fathers," with all their eloquence and piety, such untrustworthy interpreters. It is this which compels us, in perusing their writings, to pause and doubt, since passing events, party interests or the hope of polemical triumphs were to them a continual excuse for the most outrageous violations of the original meaning of the inspired volume.

Hence it is that patristic writers so often support a great cause "in a spirit alien to its own," sometimes adopting arguments that are unchristian in their ultimate grounds; sometimes resting upon errors the refutation of errors; and sometimes drawing upon the armories of darkness for weapons that, to be durable, ought to have been of celestial temper; now, it may be, trespassing against affections which furnish to Christianity its moving powers; and now against truths which furnish to Christianity its guiding lights. On behalf of God, they often seem determined to be wiser than God; and in demonstration of spiritual power, they do not scruple to advance doctrines which the Scriptures have nowhere warranted. The issue of it all was – THE ROMISH APOSTACY.

Extravagance in the use of Scripture must eventually lead either to ignorant credulity or to universal skepticism.

HINDRANCES.

Are occasioned whenever the words of Scripture are so used as to cloud their true meaning; when the reader, instead of being enlightened, is misled by biblical quotation; and when the mind of the Spirit, though professedly expressed, is really neglected or perverted.

Such is unquestionably the case when texts intended for one purpose, are applied to another; when warnings of temporal character

are silently changed into threatenings of eternal woe; when promises of earthly good are transformed into predictions of spiritual blessing; and when Christ is supposed to be referred to in passages which clearly indicate that no such thought was in the mind of the inspired writer.

The habit of quoting passages of Scripture in ways which imply a meaning and application exceedingly remote from their genuine design, is not a trifling evil. It is pregnant with injuries to the cause of Scriptural knowledge and practical edification. It encourages among Christians a widely-prevailing practice of reading the Scriptures with little attention, and of applying detached passages in sentences entirely foreign to their proper meaning. **[R645 : page 8]**

Let the object we have in view be steadily kept in mind – the promotion of a more intelligent reading of Holy Scripture, by pointing out and seeking to remove the various hindrances, and it will be seen at once that the "accommodations of which we complain, whatever may be the intention of those who make and defend them, do really "darken counsel," and so far tend to destroy the Divine testimony. Read with the impressions produced by careless expositions, the Bible, instead of being felt to be, as it really is, the most interesting book ever penned, becomes to the reader dull, because made dark; and hard to understand because treated as if it were a mere collection of disjointed fragments, to be interpreted by the aid of devout fancy.

EXAGGERATIONS OF SCRIPTURE.

By the exaggeration of Scripture we understand the use of passages in a sense stronger than that they were originally intended to bear, whether such "adding to" the Divine Testimony – for it is nothing less – arise from mistranslation, from the erroneous interpretation of imagery, or from general misconception as to the limits under which any given statement is to be received.

The misfortune is that these exaggerations prevail most on subjects in relation to which it is of all others important that the exact line of Truth should not be overstepped; that they are often winked at, if not encouraged, from an undue anxiety to produce immediate and salutary impression; and that commonly all discussion in relation to them is deprecated, on the ground that, as men are already far too little affected by the evil of sin, and far too careless respecting its consequences, anything which seems to lessen the terribleness of disobedience, even though it should be by the removal of error, must be practically injurious.

The result, in accordance with that great law of retribution which operates as surely in religion as in everything else, is that at the present time Infidelity plants its foot on these very exaggerations as the first step to confirmed unbelief; insinuates that truth, both in books and sermons, is commonly sacrificed to effect; that things are not exactly as they are represented; and that the most alarming appeals may be divested of much of their power by a careful examination of the texts by which they are enforced. So true is it that exaggeration, whatever may be its immediate effect, invariably weakens the cause it is intended to support.

Therefore, we warn all honest students of Holy Scripture to "take heed how they read"; to beware of interpretations which, however popular, can neither be sustained by the scholar nor justified by the devout; to dread especially those forms of unbelief which disguise themselves under the robe of earnestness, but which are really nothing better than expressions of that want of faith in Scripture as it is which is the curse of the Church.

H. DUNN.
