

HOW HELPS MAY BECOME HINDRANCES IN BIBLE STUDY.

We are not disposed to undervalue means of grace, as they are ordinarily termed. In many cases the amount of blessing thus imparted is greater than human arithmetic can calculate; in others, it may be doubtful whether the apparent benefit is as real as it seems to be; and in some the influence is unquestionably bad. But as a whole, there can be little doubt that sermonizing, with all its weakness, is a public benefit, and a mainstay of the religion of our land, such as it is.

Our object is not to depreciate the value of either books or men, regarded as teachers of Divine Truth; it is simply to show how easily those "helps" – for such they certainly are when rightly used – may become "hindrances" if trusted in without discrimination, – substituted for personal responsibilities, – or merely leaned upon as pillows of indolence.

Even of books specially intended to facilitate Scripture investigation, it may be asserted, without paradox, that they are sometimes at once both helps and hindrances; helps in one direction, hindrances in another.

Such we believe to be the case, notwithstanding their acknowledged excellencies, with many "critical introductions" to the Bible. They help by the information they impart; they hinder, by the impression they leave that Holy Scripture can scarcely be understood [R796 : page 2] without a prolonged course of preparatory acquisition.

We are not to be supposed, for a single moment, to look with contempt on any branch of inquiry. They all have their place in the course of a students preparation for life, and form part of that mental discipline by which the human mind is enlarged and strengthened. But,

just as "critical analyses of the English language," – which have little to do with a plain man's comprehension of his mother tongue – often create an impression on the mind of the untaught that some mysterious light is by such processes developed, so ordinary readers of Scripture are apt to conclude that, apart from critical investigations of the kind referred to, the Bible can never be properly understood. The eminent scholar, Dr. Maitland, thus wrote:

"I must add my belief that the cumbersome apparatus of systematic interpretation ought to be placed among the impediments to the right understanding of the word of God. The learning and labor which have been bestowed on it seems to me to have been worse than wasted; and so far from its helping towards the understanding of the Word of God, it appears more calculated to puzzle and perplex the student, and to supply, to those who may desire it, the means of confounding common sense and perverting the plain text of Scripture.

"These systematic schemes," he says, "are probably unknown to most readers of the Bible, and therefore, do not directly form an impediment to them; but it is obvious, that complex machinery which they never saw, and could not understand, may have a great effect on the manufactured article of which they are the consumers.

Some persons, I believe, have thought that they put honor on the Word of God, and the language in which it is written, by telling us that there is something 'in the original' which no translation can reach, – something not transfusible, expressible. No doubt this is true as regards every language, and every book in every language, unless it is confined to the most common subjects, and written in the lowest style.

In most cases the curious felicity of one language cannot be transferred to another without using such paraphrases or making such nonsense as is peculiarly infelicitous; but so far as regards meaning, where meaning is of importance, and the mode of expression of secondary consideration, or none at all, any theme written in one language may be made intelligible in another, provided the things

spoken of are known to the translator and the person for whom he translates."

For recent testimony in the same direction we turn to the University of Oxford, and there we find one of no mean eminence thus expressing himself: –

"Who would write a bulky treatise about the method to be pursued in interpreting Plato or Sophocles? No man, assuredly, who did not wish to create the impression that the meaning of these writers was beyond the comprehension of ordinary readers. And this is precisely what has been done in relation to Scripture. People have come to believe that without a formidable critical apparatus it is not possible to arrive at the meaning of God's Word; whereas, the reverse is nearer the truth. The plain and unsophisticated reader is more likely to get at the true interpretation than the learned student; for the true use of interpretation is to get rid of interpretations, and to leave us alone in company with the Author.

"When the meaning of Greek words is once known, the young student has all the real materials, which are possessed by the greatest Biblical scholars, in the Book itself. The great thing, after all, is to perceive the meaning of words in reference to their context. Less weight should be given to Lexicons, – that is, to the authority of other Greek writers, – and more to the context. It is no exaggeration to say that he who, in the present state of knowledge, will confine himself to the plain meaning of words, and the study of their context, may know more of the original spirit and intention of the authors of the New Testament than all the controversial writers of former ages put together."

Once more we return to Dr. Maitland: "The Bible," he says, "has long been the subject of discussion by the learned and the unlearned; and some of each class have left no stone unturned to make it appear that certain parts mean what they certainly do not mean. 'Biblical Criticism' has been heaped upon the Word of God, and explanation

after explanation too often only makes the matter darker than it was before.

"Truth is single; and therefore one is right and the rest, how many soever they may be, are wrong. A good deal of the evil of this arises, I imagine, from vanity, coupled with the affectation of modesty. The commentator frequently knows not what to say, but is unwilling to confess this without showing that he knows what others have said. His own mind is altogether dissatisfied with their explanations, yet he recounts them, and without saying of some (as he really ought, if he mentions them at all), that they are mere nonsense, not worth a moment's notice, he effects to leave it to the reader to choose what explanation he pleases. A simple mind is thus bewildered, and perhaps almost led to a vague idea, that what has so many interpretations, all thought worthy of record has not, in fact, any very certain or definite meaning at all."

And all this folly and confusion arises from attempts which have been too successfully made, to raise an opinion that the Bible is not to be judged of by the rules of common sense; forgetting the fact that learning can obscure as well as illustrate, and heap up chaff when it can find no wheat.

The readings and the findings of the private Christian are often in advance of the expositions and instructions of the public teacher. When once this fact is fully recognized, the false notion – now all but universally held – that the one divinely appointed means of Christian edification is sacred oratory delivered from the pulpit, will be shaken to its foundation. It will then be seen that while popular speaking, when effective, is admirably adapted to awaken the attention of the careless, to interest the young and uninformed, to kindle the affections, and to move to action, it is altogether unsuited to advanced Christians; is incapable of leading them on to deep personal acquaintance with divine truths; and, after a season, all but certain to become a hindrance to spiritual growth. This happens because it is commonly abused by the

indolent; because it occupies in the esteem of multitudes, the place of personal investigation, and because, being associated with united worship, it almost inevitably becomes the only living channel of religious impression.

Nothing is more certain than this, – that whatever wants seem to be supplied to a man while in a passive condition, he will never seek to satisfy by active service. Yet it is quite as true in religious matters, as it is in everything else, that without labor and discipline, all direct instruction must be unavailing and useless. The most elaborate and manifold apparatus can impart nothing of importance to the passive and inert mind. It is almost as unavailing as the warmth and light of the sun, and all the sweet influences of the heavens when shed upon the desert sands. Such a mind, even if it be filled with the results of other men's labors, can only be compared to a well filled granary; it bears no resemblance to the fruitful field, which multiplies that which is cast into its lap a thousand fold.

Hitherto we have proceeded on the supposition that the teaching thus imparted, although too oratorical, is on the whole, sound and sensible, but that it is not always so, is but too well known. An ingenious twist is often valued more than a true explanation. The words of **[R797 : page 2]** the text in such cases merely supply a theme, neither preacher nor hearers ever troubling themselves about its meaning. The reason for this course is, that the text is wanted merely for the purpose of communicating some moral or religious lesson, determined upon beforehand; or for the support of some cause which the preacher may be pleading, or to condemn some error which he has to combat.

This sort of perversion is bad enough when united, as it often is, with deep earnestness, solid learning, and much oratorical power; but how intolerable it becomes, when combined with ignorance and folly, vanity and conceit, will be fully admitted by all who have been obliged to listen, as too many have, to expositions of Scripture, which from

their astounding stupidity, are only calculated to excite men to laughter or scorn.

Who has not heard sermons in which the entire teaching has been made to turn altogether upon mere emphasis, applied in the most arbitrary manner to a single verse of Scripture? Sermons, which remind one only of the sentence, dear to every school boy, – "Do you ride to town today?" Since it is one which, according as this or that word is made emphatic, admits of five different meanings, and is capable of being considered in five distinct relations, viz.: to fact, to person, to mode, to place, and to time. Seriously, such is the treatment the Word of God too frequently receives at the hands of men who, themselves wanting common sense, are quite unconscious that others possess that divine gift.

– *H. Dunn.*

