

LIFE AND PORTRAITURE

of
CHRISTMAS EVANS

A New Translation from the Welsh
with a
Memoir of the Author

by

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CHAPTER TEN

PULPIT TALENTS AND LABORS

As a preacher, Mr. Evans was very peculiar. No translation of his sermons can give the English reader an adequate idea of their force and beauty in the original. He was exceedingly methodical and perspicuous. His arrangement was never loose and vague; his thoughts never confused and jiggled together. He was a “**wise master-builder**,” who took care to lay a broad and firm foundation, and then built thereon “**gold, silver, and precious stones**.” The several parts of his discourse bore a mutual relation of dependence, and each would have been incomplete without the others. His order was so natural, that it was very easy to follow him; and his manner so impressive, that it was nearly impossible to forget him.

He never spoke on a subject that he did not understand. Before entering the pulpit, he invariably measured his text in all its extent, and considered it in every possible aspect.

“He had a wonderful method,” says one, “of making the most abstruse passages appear easy and plain. He interpreted scripture by scripture, and exhibited the component parts of his subject in a clear and beautiful manner, and illustrated them by the most appropriate and striking metaphors; and forging link by link, united them together, and bound the whole up in one glorious chain. His talents were such as to enable him to cast a ray of light upon the darkest points of the Christian system.”

Mr. Evans' descriptive powers were altogether unique. He abounded in allegories of the most forcible character. In this respect, he was equaled by none of his contemporaries; transcended by none of his predecessors. Passages of this kind will be so frequently met with in the following selection from his sermons, that it is not necessary to point them out to the reader.

His happy art of description is attributable chiefly to a very remarkable imagination. This is one of the primary qualities of an orator. When it is lacking, no depth of learning, no graces of delivery, can compensate for its lack. True, argument is important.

There is no eloquence without argument. Argument must constitute the bone and the sinew of every good discourse. But the bone and the sinew constitute only the skeleton. Imagination must supply the muscle and the nerve. Imagination must clothe it with beauty, and inspire it with life; give expression to the features, animation to the eye, and to the tongue motion and melody articulate. Argument is the John Baptist of eloquence, after whom there cometh a mightier, baptizing with fire!

“Logic,” says Carlyle, is good, but not the best. The irrefragable doctor, with his chain of inductions, his corollaries, dilemmas, and other cunning logical diagrams and apparatus, will cast you a beautiful horoscope, and speak you reasonable things; nevertheless, the stolen jewel which you wanted him to find you is not forthcoming. Often, by some winged word, winged as the thunderbolt is, of a Luther, Napoleon, and Goethe, shall we see the difficulty split asunder, and its secret laid bare; while the irrefragable, with all his logical roots, hews at it, and hovers round it, and finds it on all sides too hard for him.”

Mr. Evans had feeling as well as fancy. This in a preacher is even more important than the other.

Here, we conceive, lies the principal distinction between the orator and the poet. Poetry is the language of fancy; eloquence, the language of feeling. The preacher who operates only on the judgment and the fancy may instruct and please and thus prepare the way for persuasion. Persuasion itself requires a warm and glowing heart. Eloquence has been defined, “the power of imparting one's feelings to others.”

“If you want me to weep,” said Horace, “you must weep yourself.”

The preacher who is himself unmoved, will toil in vain to move his hearers. His sermon may be as beautiful as the moonbeams on the snow; but it will be as powerless and as cold. As saith Longinus: “The orator must have a vehement and enthusiastic passion, a certain madness, or divine phrensy, breathing into his thoughts, and inspiring his speech.”

To use the language of another: — “Truth must be planted in the hot-bed of feeling, if we would witness its flowery development, and enjoy its fruit. The orator must be roused and inflamed by the majesty of his theme; not wrought up into an unmeaning fury, like a tempest in a tea-pot; but influenced and agitated by solemn considerations of truth, duty, interest, and moral grandeur.”

If this description of eloquence was ever realized in the pulpit, it was in the preaching of Christmas Evans. He spoke what he felt, and because he felt. The fountain was in his own soul, and it flowed out upon his audience in streams of living water. He was always full of his subject, and his ordinary manner was exceedingly ardent and pathetic. Sometimes he seemed quite overwhelmed with the magnitude and grandeur of his theme, and then he spoke with such impassioned earnestness as to storm the hearts of his hearers. Thus inspired, it was scarcely possible that any man of ordinary sensibilities should be otherwise than eloquent. But Mr. Evans' talents were of a superior order; and when kindling with the enthusiasm of his message, he became peculiarly energetic and impressive.

“His words came out,” as Longinus says, “as if discharged from an engine,” and their influence rested like a spell upon the ear and the heart. He transported his hearers beyond the region of argument, and leaving all their cavils and prejudices immeasurably behind, rapt them away to the third heaven of ecstasy!

The secret of all this power is found in the preacher's piety. He was a man of eminent faith and holiness. The “things new and old” for the edification of his hearers, he “brought forth out of the treasure of his own heart.”

The love of God within him imparted to his preaching a wonderful unction. His splendid mental creations were instinct with the inspiration of sanctified feeling. This divine anointing often rendered him superior to himself, clothed him with a superhuman energy, till he seemed a messenger from the other world. The man was lost in his theme. Art was swallowed up in the whirlpool of excited feeling. The audience was swept irresistibly along by the current of the discourse; acknowledging, by tears and groans, the preacher's hold upon their hearts; and sometimes losing all self-control, and bursting into the most extravagant expressions of wonder and delight. On this subject take the language of one, who, from personal acquaintance with Mr. Evans, was qualified to form a correct estimate of his character as a Christian minister:

“He was also an experimental preacher.

“That a preacher feels his subject constitutes one of his excellencies; but that his sermon be deeply imbued with the spiritual experience of the preacher, is the crowning point of his excellency. It is true, a person may speak well of the distress of other people, but he will speak more powerfully of his own distress. Persons may expatiate very eloquently on the pleasant fragrance of the herbs and flowers of foreign lands, but those who have themselves participated in the fragrant odors, in the soft breezes of those countries, can describe them in an infinitely superior manner, and to much greater advantage.

“Many may speak fluently of the mercies of God, in providence and grace protecting, preserving, pardoning sinners, &c.; but those who have experienced a sense of the divine mercy in their own souls can speak much better of it. Mr. Evans had an experience of the things of God. Not only had he heard of Calvary, but in Calvary he lived; not only had he heard of the bread of angels and of the corn of heaven, but this bread and this corn were his daily food; not only had he heard of the river of life, the streams whereof make glad the city of our God, but the crystal waters of this river were his constant drink; not only had he heard of the renewing influences of the grace of God, but he himself had been made the subject of these influences.

“He had experienced the operations of the Spirit renovating his own heart, and therefore he could speak of them, not as a matter of hearsay, but with the apostle — **‘And what our hands have handled of the Word of life, declare we unto you’**” (I John 1:1-3).

Mr. Evans' preaching was highly evangelical.

“**Jesus Christ and him crucified,**” was the alpha and omega of his ministry.

The character of his sermons fully justifies that remarkable saying upon his death-bed: "I have never labored without blood in the basin." Every one of them is illustrative of some important point in the economy of salvation. Every one of them tends to humble the sinner, and exalt the grace of God. Every one of them abounds with lofty views of the Divine Justice and Mercy.

"It is generally allowed," observes his friend "that the people who are trained by a minister, and molded by his instructions, are a good evidence of the tendency of his doctrine and ministry. In this view then, it is observed, the church where he more stately labored in Anglesea, and where the most of his care and efforts were bestowed, were a people mighty in the Scriptures; that they would converse well and readily on most of the doctrines of the Christian faith; that they labored much to improve in knowledge, and were active in the cause of religion. These nearly all were Mr. Evans' own people; they were nurtured by him, and upon his ministerial food they grew to be men, and were wholly according to the mold of his doctrine. It has been remarked, that if volumes upon volumes were written upon the subject of the tendency of his ministry, it could never be exhibited to greater advantage than has been done by himself, in those bright, clear and golden letters, which he has inscribed upon the people of his charge at Llangevni."

The following extracts from Mr. Evans contain his views of the evangelical over the legal style of preaching:

"While a preacher inculcates duties in any way but with a view to the promises of mercy, and of undeserved strength, he is more like to a moral philosopher, than to the apostles and preachers that have been a blessing unto men, such as Whitefield, and hundreds who have been in a degree blessed in the same doctrine, and by the same Spirit. It is not in the duties we are to rest, but in Christ. **"Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord . . . that they may rest from their labors and their works follow them."** It was not in reliance upon their works they passed through the river of death, as if presumptuously on a bundle of rushes, but their works will meet them in the judgment day, to be weighed there in the balance of the faith and love of Christ; and they will be there as witnesses on the part of the saints, bearing testimony that the love of Christ constrained them to live to him that died for them and was raised again."

Again: "By endeavoring to avoid the bog, you sink in the quicksand — while you are hiding the system of grace, and casting it, as it were, into the shade — duties without faith are not acceptable, **'for without faith it is impossible to please God.'** I compare you to a dry-goods merchant, who should hang up a piece of white cloth over the shelves of his store, where the cloths, fine linen, silks, &c., are kept, and thus hiding every article in his store, without exposing anything to the view of his customers, yet he would stand at the counter, and address them in the language of surprise, Why do you not buy here, for I know you have wherewith? So some preach standing like the store-keeper at the counter, saying, while the doctrine of grace is kept out of sight. Why do you not buy here? For we know that you have the money of ability; but you spend your money in the shops of the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye and the pride of life. But they reply, 'What shall we buy, sir? You tell us that there is salvation in your store— and fine linen wrought out from Bethlehem to Calvary, and white raiment; gold and pearls, and food and drink indeed; but you hide them under the veil: bring them to the counter, and open them before us; show us, carefully and plainly, whence this salvation proceeds, and by what means it has been procured; — has it been expensive to someone, seeing it is free for us?'"

Once more: “I compare such preachers to a miner, who should go to the quarry where he raised the ore, and taking his sledge in his hand, should endeavor to form bars of iron of the ore in its rough state, without a furnace to melt it, or a rolling-mill to roll it out, or molds to cast the metal, and conform the casts to their patterns. The gospel is like a form or mold, and sinners are to be melted, as it were, and cast into it. **‘But ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you’** (Romans 6:17), or into which you were delivered, as is the marginal reading, so that your hearts ran into the mold. Evangelical preachers have, in the name of Christ, a mold or form to cast the minds of men into; as Solomon, the vessels of the temple. The Sadducees and Pharisees had their forms, and legal preachers have their forms; but evangelical preachers should bring with them the ‘form of sound words,’ so that, if the hearers believe, or are melted into it, Christ may be formed in their hearts — then they will be as born of the truth, and the image of the truth will appear in their sentiments and experience, and in their conduct in the church, in the family, and in the neighborhood. Preachers without the mold, are all those who do not preach all the points of the gospel of the grace of God.”

Christmas Evans was in labors more abundant than any of his Welsh contemporaries. We have stated in the memoir that while in Anglesea, he frequently preached five times a day, and walked twenty miles. During his ministry, he made forty journeys from North to South Wales, and preached one hundred and sixty-three associational sermons. It is wonderful that his extensive travels and arduous labors did not hurry him to the grave before he had lived out half his days. But he had a firm and vigorous constitution; and having borne the burden and the heat of the day, the Master sustained him in the vineyard till the setting of the sun. And his labors were as successful as they were extensive.

“The sound of heaven,” remarks his friend “was to be heard in his sermons. He studied his discourses well; he **‘sought to find out acceptable words, even words of truth;’** and the Holy Ghost attended his ministry in an extraordinary manner.”

Few men of modern times have had a more numerous spiritual family than he. Wherever he went, throughout all Wales, multitudes claimed him as their father in Christ. “In his day the Baptist associations acquired their great popularity, and in his day arose a number of the most respectable ministers ever known in the principality.” Some of them were his own converts, and many of them had their talents inspired and their zeal inflamed under his powerful ministry. “Life and evangelical savor,” said one of them, attend Christmas Evans, wherever he is.”

“None of us,” said another, understand and comprehend the full extent of his usefulness.”

The celebrated Robert Hall mentioned his talents in terms of high commendation, and ranked him among the first men of his age.

A Congregational clergyman, who was well acquainted with him, speaks of him as follows:

“He is a connecting link between the beginning and the ending of this century. He has the light, the talent, and the taste of the beginning, and has received every new light that has appeared since.

“He was enabled to accompany the career of religious knowledge in the morning, and also to follow its rapid strides in the evening. In this he is unlike every other preacher of the day: the morning and evening light of this wonderful century meet in him. He had strength to climb up to the top of Carmel in the morning, and remain there during the heat of the day, and see the fire consuming the sacrifice and licking up the water; his strength continued, by the hand of the Lord, so that he could descend from the mount in the evening, and run without fainting before the king's chariot to Jezreel.”

We conclude this brief and somewhat imperfect portraiture with the following characteristic paragraph from the pen of Mr. Evans, illustrative of his views, not only of the right kind of pulpit ministration, but also of the injurious influence and tendency of the principal theological controversies which during his day agitated the Baptist churches in the principality of Wales:

“I consider that a remarkable day has begun upon Wales. The dawn of this day was with Vavasor Powell and Walter Caradork; the former amongst the Baptists and the latter amongst the Independents (Congregationalists). Several churches were gathered in both denominations in the twilight of morning. But when Rowlands and Harris rose — it was the sun rising of this revival day.

Mr. Jones, of Pontypool, was one of the sons of the sun rising. About ten or eleven o'clock, a host of Baptists, Calvinistic Methodists, and Congregationalists, arose; and among this class I had the honor of entering the field. The day was warm — the sermons and prayers were short, and the doctrine was evangelical. But I have reached the evening, and the day is greatly cooled. Power, tenderness, and the cross of Christ, marked the sermons in the morning; but length and tediousness are the distinguishing features of the prayers and sermons in the evening. It was too warm to preach two hours, in the heat of the day.

It appears, also, that talents are become much weaker and more effeminate as the evening spreads its shades. Beyond a doubt, the preaching of intricate points — something like questions concerning the law, and endless genealogies, have been the means of cooling the work and the workmen in the evening of the day. They will now lift up their heads and talk to every traveler that passes the field; and towards Merionethshire, they will inquire, ‘Dost thou know any thing about Sandemanianism?’ and in other districts they will ask, ‘Dost thou know something about Williamsism and Fullerism?’ and in consequence you may see young doctors many, springing up, talking like learned Lilliputians. “Some say that Christ died for all, and others that it was for his church he died; but the truth is this,” said the Lilliputians: ‘he did not die for any man, *but for the sin of all men.*’ I was there also on the great platform of this period, but I dared not condemn all systems by a sweeping sentence of infallibility, and take the bagpipe under my arm, as some were disposed to do, and cry down every new voice without proving it. **‘Prove all things.’**”

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