The Changing Scene and the Unchanging Word

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"The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever."—Isa. 40:8.

Biblical Examples, Good and Bad

Dr. Machen

THE Bible contains a wonderful collection of portraits. How vividly the figures stand out on the pages of history! How wonderfully the characters are depicted, and often with a very few strokes! The Bible seems to be able to tell more of the human heart in a few brief sentences than other books can tell in whole pages of psychological analysis.

It is no wonder that the persons who appear in the Biblical narrative have given their names to various types of character that are often recurrent in human life. So we speak of one man as being a Judas, another as a Gallio, another as an Elijah, and so on through the whole wonderful gallery of portraits that the Bible contains.

But the very vividness with which the Biblical characters are depicted may become a danger to us unless we distinguish sharply between those cases where these personages are presented to us as examples to follow from those cases where they are presented as examples which we are to avoid.

Neglect of this distinction results sometimes in very extraordinary teaching. Thus I remember hearing a young Modernist preacher some years ago who actually held up Naaman the Syrian as an example to be emulated by the congregation. "Look how careful Naaman was," said the preacher in effect, "when he went about the business of getting rid of his leprosy; look what care he took to get a letter of introduction and provide a fine present when he sought healing at the court of the king of Israel: so we ought to be equally careful in the serious concerns of life."

Well, I think any child could see that the point of the story of Naaman is the exact opposite of what that preacher got from it; I think any child could see that the point of the story is that all of Naaman's careful preparations were of no avail whatever and that what God required him to do instead was to give up his pride and accept his salvation in God's way and simply as a gift of God's grace.

Another Modernist preacher whom I remember hearing held up Isaiah's idol-maker as an example for us to follow! He took as his text, if I remember rightly, that great passage where the prophet pours out his scorn upon idolatry by describing the way in which the same tree serves the idol-maker to light a kitchen fire and to be the object of men's worship:

> He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire:
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> And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god (Isa. 44:16f.).

"This is a very interesting text," said the preacher (so far as I can remember the substance of his words); "it indicates the two necessary parts of our activities in the church. Notice how in the first place that man described by the prophet took care of the physical needs of man. He made a fire and roasted roast. So we in the church ought not to neglect men's physical needs; we ought to engage in social service and the like. But then notice also that that man described by the prophet did something else besides making a fire and roasting roast. 'With the residue thereof he maketh a god.' That also was important; that also we ought to take to heart. We ought not to be so much engrossed in caring for the spiritual needs of man that we neglect the spiritual side of things. We ought to build the fire and roast the roast. That is good. But then we also ought not to neglect what corresponds to the making of the god. So will both sides of the work of the church come to their rights."

Perhaps you may say that the man who preached such a sermon as that must have come from the backwoods. Such ignorance, such an utter lack of appreciation of one of the most magnificent pieces of irony in all literature, could surely, you may say, be found only in some place remote from the centres of modern culture. But as a matter of fact the man who preached that sermon came from one of our great cities. I do not remember his name; so please do not ask me to identify him. But my impression is that he was a graduate of one of our most famous institutions of learning.

Where you find a complete lack of understanding for the great central message of the Bible coupled with the maintenance of the habit of taking Biblical texts for preaching, you find, even among persons otherwise educated, exegetical monstrosities like that.

But even where there is no such crass error as those of which I have just spoken, people often go astray in the Biblical characters that they choose as their examples.

For instance, a good many people in our day seem to think that Gamaliel, the man who advocated a policy of "watchful waiting" with regard to the preaching of the Apostles, is a character to be emulated by Christian men.

I can see no justification for such a view. I can see no reason to think the Bible holds up Gamaliel before us as an example to be emulated. Gamaliel was a Pharisee, not a believer. If he had been a believer, something other than a bare tolerance would have been his attitude toward those who were speaking boldly in the name of Jesus.