

The Sermon That Was Never Preached

Arno Clemens Gaebelein

The Sermon That Was Never Preached

The well-known and greatly admired professor of a certain institution of learning sat in his study. On his table were numerous books of reference, but one book, the Bible, was missing. He was preparing a sermon for the coming Lord's day. He had been asked to preach in the university church. He knew there would be a great audience. The president and the faculty of the university, as well as hundreds of students, would be there. The leading professional and business men of the city would listen to him. The society people always attended the morning service of the magnificent church, famous for its well-chosen musical programme. He would have to do his very best. He knew his reputation was at stake. Some of his colleagues had preached before and had been severely criticized. He must avoid their mistakes. He must produce something unique, something up-to-date.

Sitting with his head in his hands, murmuring occasionally to himself, the professor exclaimed: "Yes, that is the thing". Then he took a piece of paper and wrote on it, "The New Conception". "That will be my theme," he said to himself, "The New Conception."

Two Sundays before a preacher had occupied the pulpit who had the reputation of leaning towards fundamentalism, so-called, and some of his statements had been ridiculed, while the young men and women had called him "an old fogey". By preaching on "The New Conception", the professor saw an opportunity to answer some of the arguments the preacher had made. He knew this would be very gratifying to his audience.

It was now time to make an outline. But a text was needed. It was customary to use at least a Bible verse as the foundation of a Sunday morning service. What text should he take? He finally selected Acts 17:19, "And they took him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?"

"This is a fortunate choice," the professor said to himself, "for it gives me a chance to display something of my knowledge of Greek history and literature." He wrote rapidly. After jotting down something about Areopagus, Mars' Hill, and Greek philosophy, he put down as the first part of his sermon, "The Old Conception".

"There is an old conception of things religious," he wrote. "This old conception cannot be maintained any longer in the light of modern scientific research. All that our fathers believed is out-of-date. If the great theologians of the past came back to life they would discard their beliefs and fall in line with our modern conception. But what is this old conception?" Here he had a chance to answer the former preacher's statements. He would mention the ridiculous belief in an infallible Book. There was nothing infallible in this world. Infallibility meant the complete arrest of progress, and that was impossible. There could never be an infallible book, nor was there ever infallible truth, nor an infallible person. Christ was not infallible; He made His mistakes.

Next, the professor thought, he would speak of the unscientific belief in a virgin birth which, in the final analysis, was nothing but legend without any historical evidence. Next, he made remarks about the resurrection of a man who had died. The greatest scholars had contradicted this belief. Science knew nothing of it. No sane man doubts, he would argue, that Jesus Who died lives today, not as a risen man, but by His teachings, His character, His manhood, His leadership, and His example. The old conception as to existence after death, of a heaven and a hell (he struck out the word "hell" and substituted "a place of punishment") came next. Such a belief was likewise branded unreasonable. We know nothing of the

future. There is probably survival after death, but certainly not in the form taught in the Bible. We know nothing definite about it.

Then came the second part of his sermon, "The New Conception". Like the Athenians of old, we are still searching and are now on the right track. He wrote still more rapidly as he advanced the different phases of the evolutionary theology of modernism.

Caroline had not a strong constitution. Her fever continued all night, while father and mother watched anxiously at her couch. Now and then the professor went to his study and fell on his knees before the table with his sermon notes. He wept silently and then said: "O God, if Thou hearest prayer, save my child, my only child, my Caroline."

The morning came and the doctor, who appeared early, was greatly disappointed in finding the little girl much worse. She breathed hurriedly. Occasionally she murmured in her delirium: "Daddy, up the hill." The physician looked serious. He decided to remain for several hours.

The professor went back to his study. He wanted to pray but he could not pray.

An hour later the family physician, an old Christian, knocked at his door. The professor jumped to his feet. "Well, doctor, how is she? Is she responding to your treatment? Will she get well?"

The old man did not answer him. He looked into the father's face, then silently bowed his head. Finally he said: "Come, professor, and see her beautiful smile. She is better – better in the way a Christian thinks of..." He did not finish the sentence. They had reached the sick room and there Caroline was lying, with closed eyes and a peaceful smile upon her white face. She was dead.

The sad news spread quickly. Among the students were a few earnest believers. As night came on, they gathered beneath the window of the professor's study and sang in subdued tones:

"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;

The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.

When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,

Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me!

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;

Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass' away;

Change and decay in all around I see;

O Thou Who changest not, abide with me !"

They did not know that the professor sat at his study table, his sermon pushed aside and all the reference books put back on the shelves. His Bible was in his hands. He had opened it to a familiar passage remembered from other days, and read, while his eyes were filled with tears: "Let not your heart be troubled, ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for

you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself, that where I am, there ye may be also.”

Then the song broke in and, while he listened, he sobbed silently.

“Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;

Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;

Heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee;

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!”

The professor turned the leaves of his Bible a second time and read once more, this time: “I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die. Believest thou this?” In a quivering voice the man cried out: “O Lord, I believe.”

Suddenly his eyes were opened. He saw the hollowness of the new conception of modernism. He felt in his innermost soul that it held no hope and comfort for him. All he had believed appeared to him lifeless, powerless, hopeless, unable to give what he needed most in the hour of deepest sorrow. He fell on his knees and prayed. And such a prayer! He confessed his wrong and cast himself into the arms of his forgiving Lord.

On Monday morning they went up the hill. The white flower-covered casket in which Caroline’s body rested was carried by four members of the faculty. The preacher read: “For this we say unto you by the Word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.”

After the casket had been lowered into the ground, the father with bowed head stepped forward and in the presence of the large assembly of people said: “Friends, my darling is gone. She is with Him Who died for her, and I want to confess Him before this open grave as my Saviour Who came to earth from heaven’s glory to die for our sins, Who was buried, rose again on the third day, and Who will come again to take us into His own glorious presence. Then my Caroline will be clasped to my bosom again. This faith which I denied so often in your presence, students and colleagues, is the only faith which gives peace and hope.”

Dr Arno C. Gaebelein