

Discourses. By EDWARD H. HALL, Pastor of the First Parish Church of Cambridge, Mass. Boston: George H. Ellis.

The sermons which constitute this volume have been collected by a committee of the First Parish Church of Cambridge, as at once a demonstration of Mr. Hall's ministerial power, and a memorial of the fact that he does not wish for himself longer the "slight compulsions" of a position to which he accords great honor, and which he has manifestly

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

adorned. These discourses represent a very high order of ability upon the thought-side of religion. To say that they are singularly free from emotion would be not quite true; and yet the preacher is at some pains, here and there, to declare for intellectual clearness rather than for emotional and sentimental appeal. They have a certain current of feeling, which is not like the glinting of light from the crest of the wave, but rather like the strong sweep of the tide, which is, itself, the reason that there should be waves at all. Mr. Hall is not an emotional preacher, and yet no man can have such deep convictions and deal with such high themes as those that compose this volume — the supernatural, the divine humanity, immortality, and others of like range and sweep — without producing the effect, even in the cold page, under the eye, that conviction, passing to such heights and delving to such depths of human experience, takes fire by its own friction and the rapidity of its own motion. These are not sermons for the mass of men, and would be utterly inappropriate to such audiences as gather about the so-called "popular preacher;" but this is not an unfavorable criticism of the discourses. The opening sermon, dealing with the supernatural, would not be "understood of the vulgar," unless they had had the good fortune to have been brought up upon the best models of English speech, and lifted to see the distinctions that the near view along low levels naturally excludes. This is not a denial of the supernatural, but a tremendous affirmation that there is no distinction between the natural and supernatural in effect, which would seem to the unthoughtful, at first, such a denial. We have never seen the matter put more clearly than in this sermon: the mind passing backward sees the natural grow less and less, until the supernatural covers all the field; passing forward, it sees the natural grow more and more, until the supernatural becomes only the belt of shadow that is cast by a great light. That there is any margin of shadow is due, in Mr. Hall's system and in that of most thoughtful people, to the fact that we have not yet kindled a light large enough to illuminate the whole sphere, but it is due to still another reason, that we must use these terms, natural and supernatural, as distinctive; every sphere when most illumined must have a hemisphere in shadow, that is, when the light is near enough to be controlled by the mind that sees it. This sermon has a characteristic method which pertains to the whole series. The preacher might have taken for the title of his volume, "It is Mind that sees and hears; all else is deaf and blind;" for he is dealing with humanity with such entire confidence in its powers, native and to be acquired, as to make one feel that the divine-humanity is the common term by which all humanity may be known.

In thus asserting the divinity of man and the humanity of God, Mr. Hall is true to the best traditions of the Unitarian pulpit, — traditions now enlarged to fact by the growing knowledge of the world, which has taken the prophetic insight of the older prophets of liberal thought, and justi-

fied it. It is not strange to find in such a volume as this the old views reasserted in ways so strong and with illustrations so new as to make them seem the natural expression of this time; but it is curious to observe that the point of view here consistently maintained (as in many pulpits besides) is borrowed from the same source, either consciously or unconsciously, and constitutes, at once, the strength and charm of many a preacher who would repudiate the charge that he was not fulfilling the conditions of traditional evangelicalism. We cannot pay a higher tribute to Mr. Hall's method than to say that, while these sermons lack the glow and illustrative power of Martineau, they proceed along the lines of the same philosophy of life and view of the world. It has been well said of Dr. Martineau that "his illustrations are arguments." In the sermons before us, the absence of that wealth of illustration, which in the great preacher just named is singular and persuasive, leaves the page sometimes a little bare; it makes one feel that he is leaning upon the strong pillars of the great temple, but misses the coming and going of those glints of color, which, in the full light of day, touch the living forms of the worshipers. This is due to the preacher's self-containedness and perfect poise, and we fear, sometimes, in the reading, may be a little due to the failure to feel all the way down through the ranges of human experience; but this might appear in the tones of the voice, without being possible of demonstration in the printed page.

Mr. Hall's style is clear and crystalline; at times dogmatic, it is always convincing. His dread of sentimentality makes the line of cleavage in his sentences sometimes painfully clean and exact. This is good from the standpoint of lucidity, but makes one feel that the incision made by the thought might be unknown by its recipient, as in the old legend of the miraculous blade of Norse mythology, which slew its victim with such a clean stroke that he did not know he was cleft asunder until he tried to rise.

Here and there, throughout these sermons, the optimism which declares for the existence of the right and the inevitably true is just a little dashed by the conviction that the inevitably true and certainly right are a long way ahead. In the farewell discourse, which so well sets forth the office of the preacher, Mr. Hall declares:—

I still feel that of all spiritual atmospheres, the most invigorating and health-giving is the atmosphere of reality. I still feel that of all the illusions of the hour, that which makes religion a process of soothing and fondling, and would lull the sorrowful heart, or young soul, by soft and dreamy rites, is falsest and most perilous. There is not yet room, I suppose, nor is the time fully ripe for the preacher who cares to tell the truth upon spiritual themes; who in times of sorrow will not go a step beyond his knowledge of the future to conjure up enchanting visions of what lies beyond the veil; who in hours of mental struggle will not claim a more intimate acquaintance with the divine counsels, or the divine nature, than he really has; who in moments of falter-

ing faith will not stretch a single point or borrow a single mystic phrase to save a hundred believers for his sect. Yet, after all, for frankly facing the truth, and looking into it with honest eyes, the time has always come. Not what we want to imagine God to be, but what He verily is; not what we can possibly dream of immortality, but what it actually promises; not what we think of the present or of the future, of earth or of heaven, but what they really are, is what the soul needs; needs it in grief, as in joy; in the convulsions of spiritual agony, as in complacent trust. Grand verities are these,—God, Heaven, immortality.

There can be no doubt that Mr. Hall is right in saying that the truth, as a man apprehends it, is always to be spoken without regard to any ulterior consideration, but he seems, in the passage just quoted, to have lost sight of the fact that a man can speak no more truth than he sees; and in declaring for these "grand verities, God, Heaven, immortality," no man can truly say he declares for the ultimate realities as they are, but must content himself with saying that he declares for them as they seem to be; for in the last analysis, *relation* is, perhaps, all that we can confidently affirm; and we feel sometimes that the measure of this relation, in every man who is speaking truthfully, so far as he sees, is not given its full value by men who, like Mr. Hall, think clearer and see straighter than the apparently compromising spirit whom they criticise. The present hour, which Mr. Hall says is "not ripe," has fully come in many more places than his rather despondent note concerning it announces. It is not good to insist too much upon "naked truth" or ultimate reality, lest we underrate the sincere deliverances of men to whom the liberal position is not as yet a familiar field. This is said in no depreciation of Mr. Hall's integrity of purpose, but only out of the conviction that the "grand verities, God and immortality," must always rest, as to what they are, upon what *they may be* to the man who announces them as real. This is but saying what Mr. Hall himself says in another place (p. 230), that "no truth comes into the world at all save in the mould of personal belief;" that "the world's great religious leaders have been such solely by virtue of their capacity of feeling profoundly and seeing intensely life's great verities. Their hold upon the world has come through the contagion of their individual faith."

We can very well conceive that certain preachers will find this volume of discourses vague and abstract. They cannot be abstract to any minds not so much in the habit of delighting themselves with the garish colors of sentimental religion that the fine lines of the engraved plate seem to them to show no life, because there is no crude color. They cannot be vague except to minds so habituated to seeing figures large, through a fog, that the sunrise which floods everything with light has brought to them a show of the world to which their eyes are unaccustomed. The human mind, through large sections of its history, delights in a fog; and it is one of the discouraging facts which confronts the student of his

kind that when a man declares for the ultimate realities of religious experience in terms clear and strong, as if he knew them to be there, his words fall without their full force upon minds which are not so much concerned with facts of religious experience as with some definition of the facts. It is a great thing to have, now and again, a volume of discourses that deal with the roots of religion as they are native to the human soil, and with the fruits of religion as they appear in human conduct, unmixed with any dogmatic utterance that reads like a formula for cultivating the fruits of the spirit, or like a prescription for some artificial fertilizer to be applied to the roots of religion. Such a volume of discourses the friends of Mr. Hall have made a part of the inheritance of his ministry.

THOMAS R. SLICER.

BUFFALO, N. Y.