

RELIGIOUS SINCERITY.

READ BEFORE A **MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE**, BY WILLIAM SILSBEE.

RELIGIOUS sincerity — by which I mean sincerity in the exercise of religious duties and offices — will be generally acknowledged, I suppose, to lie at the foundation of all growth in the Christian life, and of all success in the Christian ministry. It may not, however, be always admitted that there are peculiar and great difficulties in the practice of this virtue; that it is beset with some serious questions; that it frequently involves a very careful study of circumstances and side-issues. Yet such seems to me the fact. We may emphasize our exhortation, "dare to be true;" we may paint the meanness of deception as we will; but, after all, it is one of the most difficult things in the world to be uniformly, consistently, thoroughly sincere. "Speak the truth at all times," — how plain that sounds! But, in the first place, suppose I do not *know* the truth. "Then speak what you *believe* to be true." What! "at all times?" everything I believe to be true? I should be driven out of society as an intolerable nuisance, if I attempted to do this. How can it be denied? Prudence and tact and Christian charity demand that, while I should falsify nothing, I should frequently keep back much that I believe with all my heart to be true. Yet herein lies the great difficulty which a truthful man feels in endeavoring to be always sincere: *how much* of concealment is consistent with sincerity? It is certain that silence sometimes misleads, and gives a wrong impression of our thought, quite as much as a deliberate falsehood would have done. Are we, therefore, responsible for that wrong impression? Certainly not always. It depends very much on the peculiar circumstances of the case. If a man, for example, *chooses* to interpret my silence as "consent" or affirmation, when he has asked me a question which I am not bound to answer, — nay, perhaps a question which I have no right to answer, — surely it is not my fault, but his, that he has gone away deceived.

And I think it will be found so in many similar cases, where the responsibility does not all rest upon him who speaks, or who is expected to speak, but is shared by those, also, who take the place of listeners. "*Caveat auditor!*" Let the hearer look out that he hears correctly and report sincerely what was spoken; and, not less, that he understands the *silence*, when there is no speech. There is no reason why we should not exercise a sound judgment in receiving as well as in imparting the truth. We are not always, then, responsible for the deception which comes from our concealment and our silence, for we cannot always prevent it without violating higher duties. But there is no doubt that we are responsible for a great deal of the silence which deceives; and so, in considering this subject of sincerity, we must take carefully into account the import, not only of the words uttered, but of the refraining from utterance.

What, then, is sincerity in the exercise of religious duties and offices? It is to use all forms of expressing religious thought and emotion, whether words, tones, looks, or manners, according to their true and well-understood intent. It is an utter repudiation of every kind of "pious fraud." It is a fearless avowal of our sincere convictions upon the great truths of religion and morality, whether those convictions be popular or unpopular, dangerous or safe. It believes in no temporizing or compromises for the sake of a supposed "greater usefulness." It holds truth, in the long run, to be the most useful thing in the world. Sincerity — to sum it up in fewer words — consists essentially of two parts: first, to say what you mean, and nothing else; second, to mean what you say. I do not think of any reform more needed in the Christian church and ministry than a reform in the direction of sincerity, considered in both these particulars. How frightfully untruthfulness prevails among all Christian bodies we may see in the tendency to exaggerated statements of their own progress, in the hiding of obnoxious doctrines, in misrepresentations of those who differ from them, in the indulgence shown to a deceitful and dishonest member, pro-

vided he is "sound in the faith," in the various arts of meanness by which they seek to gain over new converts, in the still more miserable arts of *make-believe*, by which they try to patch up their decaying faith, and present a fair appearance to the world. There are large numbers, of course, in all the Christian churches who abhor all this, and will have nothing to do with it. And we may rejoice, too, that the penalties for avowing the honest truth are far less than they once were. Still I think we should be startled, could some angel of light expose to us all the hidden deceit and hypocrisy now baptized with the Christian name; and we should pray more frequently than ever for a revival of sincerity among all the churches, as their one great and desperate need.

But it is a question which more especially concerns us now, Are *ministers* under any peculiar temptations to insincerity? Our own experience compels us to answer, Yes; and I should not have brought up the subject here if I had not earnestly desired your attention to this danger and the means of meeting it. The minister is supposed to have religion for his sole business or profession. To preach it, to explain it, to illustrate and apply it, and to *live* in accordance with his profession, or, at least, to do nothing to disgrace it, this is what he is supposed to aim at; and anything below this is deemed unworthy of his sacred calling. I think we should none of us wish to deny that this, at least, is our aim. And we might hold this in all simplicity and truth to nature, if the popular tradition did not also make us bound to carry out our ideas of this ministry in certain "clerical" ways. We enter upon our office, knowing that certain things are expected of us, in accordance with long-established usage, whether these things accord with our ideas of right or not. If we should act counter to those expectations, we might either lose our place, or lessen our influence, or, at any rate, shock and disturb some truly good men and women. The reluctance to do either of these things constitutes a temptation to insincerity,—not always, but oftentimes. For it cramps our freedom. It tempts us to hold back our honest and mature

convictions. It makes us less independent ; and a *state of dependence* is peculiarly a state of temptation to some kind of falseness. Whatever interferes with the entire simplicity of the Christian character is also a constant exposure to this evil of insincerity ; and I do not know any one virtue so hard for most Christian ministers to maintain as that of simplicity. For how can the minister forget that he is a *marked man* in the community, and the more so in a smaller community ? Are not his ways criticised, both in the pulpit and out of it ? Is not his home life a great opportunity for gossip and censoriousness ? Has he any rights of privacy which the public are bound to respect ? We may laugh at this, or be vexed at it, or quietly endure it, as our humor may be ; but we can hardly ignore it, and to be conscious of it in any way is a sore trial to one's simplicity. Nevertheless, we must accept this trial, and meet it as we best can. There is such a thing as a frank and independent, yet modest, assertion of our rights and duties as men, which no popular notion of clerical propriety should be allowed to interfere with. It is too common a thing to judge ministers as though they were *not* men ; for they are sometimes treated as though, like machines, they could be set agoing in one uniform, unvarying course ; and, at other times, as though they were raised above the ordinary weaknesses of humanity, and did not need the precautions or discipline which other men require. These things are indeed somewhat discouraging to one who is heartily trying to serve God rather than to please men. And yet I think, such is the respect for *truth* in nearly all minds, that the minister who is known to be acting from his own deliberate and earnest convictions of right will usually be allowed to go on unmolested. And each one of us may do our part, if we will, to revise and correct the popular errors concerning the Christian ministry, — especially by making it understood that we must at all events be *true*, — that we will say what we mean, — that we cannot otherwise, — that "by manifestation of the truth" *alone* we will "commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

Let me give a single example. Cecil, in his admirable

"Remains," — one of the most useful books I have ever found, — says that if a man of the world should meet his minister at some place of amusement or public exhibition, and should say, "Why, I did not expect to see you here!" then the minister ought not to have been there. Now, with all deference to such excellent authority, I cannot agree to this decision if it be meant for an invariable rule. It seems to me a dangerous concession to the distinction between clerical and laical morality. Whoever holds that that distinction is wrong ought to say so, both by word and by example; and thus the man of the world will be taught no longer to "expect" his minister to conform outwardly to a standard of propriety which in his heart he believes to be unsound and false.

But I must hasten to speak of that other part of sincerity, which is by far the more difficult and the more rare, yet is so vital to the Christian ministry, "*to mean what we say.*" To say what you mean, what you think, what you believe with all your heart and soul, — to say just that, and nothing different from that, — is comparatively easy. But to mean what you say! to mean it fully, entirely, without any mental reservation — who could bear this test without shrinking? *How much* we say! in the pulpit and out of it. How many words are thought necessary! for society, for charity, for instruction, for grave and for gay occasions. And dare we say that every word we use is freighted with meaning? Can we pretend to feel or to believe all that our words express? "Oh, no!" one might reply; "a great many of the common phrases of social intercourse are recognized as unmeaning. Nobody is supposed to put his whole soul into them. They are mere conventionalities, which deceive no one; and so there is no insincerity in using them." This sounds plausible, yet I doubt if it is quite true. For, with all the hollowness of social forms and phrases, I think they are never long retained when it is once admitted that they are absolutely *empty of all meaning*. Some savor of charity, grace, or courtesy must still linger in them, else they are cast off, to make room for new and sincerer forms. But what must be the effect upon

the character of habitually using words which mean nothing ! To do this in one department of life, and to believe that we do it innocently, — may it not lead to insincerity when graver issues are concerned ? Language is an instrument not to be trifled with. The more true we can make it to its purpose, as the vehicle of thought and feeling, in every situation of life, so much the better for our own characters and for our proper work.

And this brings me to a point of great importance, and indispensable to the satisfaction of every conscientious man : Sincerity is a *question of degrees*. *How much* of it can we get into our words and actions ? should be an inquiry with us all. God forbid that we should be convicted of insincerity whenever we fail to put into our language all it will hold ! Then were we sincere only in the rarest moments. Take the simplest statement of faith, for illustration : “I believe in God.” You, and I, and thousands besides, can say this, I hope, sincerely ; yet with what vast difference in the amount of *meaning* we put into it ! No wonder Faust asks, “Who dares to say, I believe in Him ?” if we understand by such a confession, I believe in all that this word can mean. And there are not only great differences between one man and another as to the meaning they put into this creed, but we ourselves, in different moods and experiences, find that we have different degrees of faith to express by these familiar words. We are shocked sometimes to think how carelessly we may have repeated them — how *little* we have really *meant* it according to our words. Is it insincere, then, to be careless, to be thoughtless in the use of speech ? How can we conclude otherwise ? For how can a man mean what he says, unless he bestows some thought and reflection upon it ? The mere mechanical repetition of devout phrases is justly chargeable with insincerity, in the stricter and higher sense of this word, for the simple reason that there is scarcely a trace of thought or feeling in such an exercise. I must not only “*say* my prayers,” but think them and feel them, if I would not be guilty of solemn mockery before God. What a momentous question comes up here ! There is no public reli-

gious duty, alike so important in itself, and so liable to insincerity, as public worship. Is any minister of religion able to say that he has never incurred this guilt? Would not the honest confession of most of us be, God forgive me my public prayers? We have not intended to be otherwise than sincere, when invoking the Searcher of hearts. We have abhorred the name of "Hypocrite" or "Formalist." But who can say, from Sunday to Sunday, "I meant every word of my prayer — meant exactly what I said, and in all its fullness and force"? O happy and enviable man, if there be such! For myself, I gladly take refuge from a too sternly accusing conscience in those lines of Keble, —

"What are all prayers beneath,
But cries of babes, that *cannot know*
Half the deep thought they breathe?"

I abandon the hopeless attempt to take in *all* the meaning of the words I use. I only strive to say what comes to me as the true expression of my thoughts and affections at the time. I dare not claim that it is the truest possible. I simply trust that some fitting words will be "given me in that same hour," if I faithfully endeavor to open my heart to all holy influences. But let us never forget how urgent is the importance of putting *more and more* meaning into our prayers. I think we can have no conception how vastly the power of the ministry would be increased thereby. There seems to me to be a great deal of the feeling in the community that ministers say many things as matters of course, and do not mean half that they pray for. Could all occasion for that scandal be removed, what an earnest, living ministry we should have again, "mighty through God" for the extinction of all sin and error, and the introduction of the kingdom of truth and love!

Of the many other topics which my subject suggests, I have room to speak of but one. "It is a serious question," says Cecil, in the little book already quoted, "whether a minister ought to preach at all beyond his experience." And I add the question here, Is it not a violation of sincerity to do

so? "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen," said the great Teacher; and his Apostles said it after him. All the most effective preachers in the world must have been able to say the same. They could assure their hearers that what they preached they knew from deep and often most painful experience. Their very tones and manner would give evidence of their deep sincerity. And it is not easy to see how a man can put much meaning into words which do not come from actual life, — from his own personal acquaintance with the subjects of which he treats. Will it be said that there are some subjects which cannot, from their very nature, be matters of experience? This is true undoubtedly of *abstractions* in philosophy and religion, but it is not true of anything which comes under the category of preaching the Gospel. It is the very test of fitness for the pulpit, that a truth be *practical*, and, therefore, something which does relate to experience. But I mean "practical," of course, in the widest sense, as that which in any way may affect our daily life, by confirming every better purpose, by supplying new motives to goodness, by showing us the beauty of holiness and the hatefulnes of sin, and in numerous other ways which I need not mention. Now a preacher might indeed declare all the truths of the Gospel as being simply what he reads in the sacred record. But that which constitutes his peculiar "call to preach" is that he can do more than this, — that these truths are what he is trying to live by, that they are not to him "abstractions," but his high aims, his "inward light," his daily joy and strength and peace; or, at least, that he is constantly aspiring to make them such. How questionable the good we can do, when we preach a truth which has not in some measure passed into our life! I am inclined, therefore, to the opinion that it would be better *never* to preach beyond our experience — better, because more simple and more sincere. The minister "must preach," to quote Cecil once more, "as he feels. If he feels not as he might and ought, he must pray for such feelings; but, till he has them, ought he to pretend to them?"