

The American Presbyterian.

John A. Weir 15 July 69

New Series, Vol. VI, No. 17.

Genesee Evangelist, No. 1197.

Strictly in Advance \$2.50. Otherwise \$3.
Postage 20cts, to be paid where delivered.

PHILADELPHIA, THURSDAY, APRIL 29, 1869.

Home & Foreign Miss. \$2.00.
Address:—1334 Chestnut Street.

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THE PEOPLE'S COMMENTATOR.*

The appearance of the closing volumes of Albert Barnes' last commentary seems a fitting occasion for more than the curt notice with which the issues of the press are generally announced. The occasion is suggestive of many thoughts. The most widely accepted commentator on the Christian Scriptures of any age in the Church's history, who has spoken in many tongues, and to millions of hearers, has just laid down his pen, with his task as yet incomplete. The people's commentator on the people's book, after surveying the field of New Testament exegesis, and commenting on Job, Isaiah and Daniel in the Old, closes his labor of love with an exposition of that central book of the Word which combines so marvelously the old dispensation with the new. Fuller of years than of strength, he desists from the work of his life with the satisfaction of duty done, and great results accomplished.

The place which Albert Barnes occupies as a commentator, can we think, be best appreciated after a glance at the history of Scripture exposition. It began after the return from the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews needed to have their sacred records rendered into Chaldee, and explained by running paraphrastic comments, if they were to understand them as read in the Synagogue, and the Temple. Hence in course of time grew up those curious and often valuable Chaldee paraphrases of the Old Testament called the Targums. In New Testament times, we find our Lord and His apostles and disciples engaged in the same work of expounding the Scriptures to the people. The primitive Church continued the great work. The homilies of Origen, of Theodoret, of Ephraem the Syrian, of Gregory, of Chrysostom, and of Augustine, were all expository preachings, commentaries published by word of mouth to the people, when that was the method of reaching the greater number. In the Middle Ages, the literature of the Church is less rich in this respect. Systematic treatises on theology taxed the strength of the great writers; the pulpit was less engaged in exposition of the word, as the language of the Church's worship fell away from the memory of the people, and the commentaries written presuppose a theological interest and a scholastic training which are the privilege of a few. Bernard's Sermons on the Canticles, Wiclif's Postils, Savonarola's on the Hebrew Prophets, and perhaps the works of Nicholas de Lyra, might be claimed as exceptions, but only Wiclif and Savonarola spoke in a vernacular tongue.

When the Reformation made the Bible the book of the people, its exposition rose in importance as it sank in mere authority as compared with the Word itself. The invention of printing extended the commentator's range indefinitely. Erasmus's Notes on the New Testament, the first Commentary for the people ever printed, was "done into English," and placed by royal order in every English church for the use of the people. Luther's Lectures on Galatians and Postils on the Gospels and Epistles of the Church Year, after thrilling his listeners at Wittenberg, were carried over Germany and beyond her boundaries, as powerful preachers of the Gospel of faith in Christ. Calvin's expositions of the whole Bible (with the author's cautious exception of the Revelation) contributed immensely to the advance of the Reformation, and have in many respects never been superseded. But in later ages, a sort of Middle Age of Protestant Scholasticism intervened, and the Word was searched and expounded, not for the edification of the people and the knowledge of the mind of the Spirit, but for the confirmation of theological systems. The exegete threw his whole strength into the exposition of the great proof texts of this and that doctrine. Formal sermons banished Scripture exposition from the pulpit and the vernacular tongues into the *Praelectiones* and *Theses* of the schools and seminaries.

We have enjoyed a revival of better things through that slow progress of popular education, which is one of the best and most assured results of Protestantism, and which is every day making more possible the Protestant ideal—an open Bible as the guide of an intelligent community. We are learning also to subsidize the labors of the learned in the edification of the people. A new interest in the Word of God has been awakened by the very impugment of its divine authenticity and authority. In whatever other respects

we have fallen away from the spirit of the Reformation, in this at least we are coming back to it. The wide and rapid extension of the Sabbath School as a trainer of youth in the word of God has united with these other causes, in making popular commentaries a necessity of the times.

Whatever may be urged of the merits of the various works which have appeared to meet this demand, we hold this fact to be patent,—that none have been so widely acceptable to the general Christian public as those of Albert Barnes. His "Notes Critical and Explanatory" on the various books of the New Testament, and his more extensive works on several of the Old, have been circulated not by thousands but by millions. They have been used as helps, alike by those who regarded the author's personal views in theology as dangerously lax, and those who looked on him as unreasonably rigid and conservative. They have, more than any other books, kept Calvinism in its most acceptable aspect before the public mind, yet they have not excited suspicion or alarm as the weapons of proselytism. The present writer remembers having learnt to honor the name of Albert Barnes among the bluest of Old World seceders; he has seen the same terms of respect from the pens of American "Liberals" so called. In places where his theological treatises would be shunned as lax, or despised as foggish, his Notes have gone with freedom, carrying an exegesis freed from the trammels of dogma, yet in bonds to Christ.

The eminently judicial character of Mr. Barnes' mind has had much to do with this. There is a manifest fairness and desire to get at just the truth of the matter, which wins on even those who reject, while they respect, his conclusions. Every reader of his "Letters to Gerritt Smith," which appeared in our columns a year ago, must have been struck with his evident dislike of taking any unfair advantage of an adversary. His method suggests the attitude of a judge weighing complicated evidence; and whatever modification the progress of exegesis may suggest as to his conclusions, his method will always approve itself to conscientious men as the only honest one. This may seem strange praise to some, but not to those who know how rare this judicial spirit is. The theologians of the dogmatic age of Protestantism evince very little of it; and if we may judge from Dr. Chas. Hodge's elaborate attempt to explain the theories of Cocceius into Rom. v. 12-19, it is still very rare among those who claim to have inherited the mantle of the dogmatists. It requires a mental effort, of which many learned men are evidently incapable, to view the Scriptures otherwise than through the spectacles of a system. An exegesis which is not the handmaid but the equal of Dogma, which can pass a text which seems to impugn some favorite tradition of the fathers without trying to torture it into orthodox form in the name of "the analogy of faith"—this is not to be found in every writer. Mr. Barnes has combined it with a reverent common sense, to a degree which fully justifies the approval with which his works have been received.

We believe, also, that Mr. Barnes' denominational connections have been fortunate in this respect. The New School Presbyterian Church might be called the Church of logical inconsistency, or rather the Church of a consistency that is above logic. She sprang out of an honest effort to do justice to both sides of the truth, however unable to apprehend them in any intellectual unity. She holds none the less to a divine love that seeks men in its saving power before they seek it, because she holds to the truth of natural freedom and perfect responsibility of the will. She holds with equal certainty that God will have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and that His will is the ground of salvation and of righteousness in every one who does come to the light. She grasps with firm and reverential hand the great Catholic and Reformed verities of the past, and yet looks with confident hope to the future for a deeper and broader knowledge of the things of God. As against the false Liberal, she holds that no man can be certain of progress in the future, who by rejection of all fixed articles of faith, denies that it has been attained to in the past. As against false Conservatives, she holds that only they walk in the footsteps of the prophets of old who are, under the guidance of the same Spirit, advancing onward in the same path of doctrinal progress. Like a wise scribe, instructed unto the kingdom of heaven, she brings forth out of her storehouse things new and old.

On this account we think that Mr. Barnes' ecclesiastical position is especially favorable to that freedom from undue theological bias which has characterized his expositions.

These volumes on the Psalms possess more than the excellencies which belong to his Notes

on other books. To a long experience in the exposition of God's word, he has added a long experience in that life of service to God, which itself is the key to unlock the book of Psalms. While never rising to ecstasy or thrusting his own personality into the foreground, he has yet drawn on the stores of this best wisdom in the performance of his work. The external and historical side of the Psalms is fully and satisfactorily discussed. The later works of travel are freely drawn on for illustration, and a wide range of translators and expositors is subjoined in the critical discussion. Patient study, prayerful insight, and a calm judgment, show their results on every page.

As an expositor, Mr. Barnes is of the conservative school. The titles of the Psalms he regards as part of the inspired word; the Messianic Psalms he regards simply in their old explanation; the quotations made in the New Testament are accepted as the highest authority in fixing the general scope; in the case of Psalms whose authorship is not specified, he inclines to ascribe them, with old writers, to an earlier rather than, with modern, to a later epoch. He rejects the theory that Psalms CXX to CXXIV form a "Pilgrim-book," and regards their title as a musical term. The imprecatory Psalms are justified on grounds of principle.

We shall rejoice if his work will lead to the introduction of the Book of Psalms as a subject of study into the higher classes of our Sunday Schools. We believe that a careful and intelligent study of these inspired lyrics would not only give our children a profounder insight into the meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures, but also do much to develop a sounder and manlier type of Christian piety in our churches. To this end—in spite of the great merits of Prof. Alexander's work—some such commentary as the present was needed, and it is not an unfitting close to Mr. Barnes' labors to have supplied that need.

R. E. T.

THE THANKSGIVING.

It is quite time for the *Te Deum*. The great things which our ascended Lord by His Holy Spirit has been doing for the churches, call for joyful acknowledgment from His people. Last fall, amid the whirl of almost unparalleled political excitement, the prospect, to many minds, before the churches was dark. And, in fact, the whole winter had almost gone before any decided signs of reviving appeared. It was in the balmy halcyon days of the middle of February, that we seemed to catch the first notes of the spiritual spring-time. And even then we felt constrained to speak guardedly, as between hope and fear. But from that hour, the indications have continually and rapidly improved until we can fairly reckon the present among the Revival Seasons. Prayer has been heard. The Holy Spirit has been given. Preaching has been rendered effective. The churches have been roused to consecration and personal activity. And the ingatherings have been large and encouraging. Doubtless there has been joy in heaven over repenting sinners and the advances of the Redeemer's kingdom. Let not our anthems be unsung.

For we have not only beheld, but as a church, and as a city we have largely shared in, these great blessings. Not a few of our city churches have witnessed the largest accessions in their history. The ancient and seemingly decaying have renewed their youth. The weak and perishing have felt a thrill of new life. Those which had already become familiar with displays of divine grace, have been led to a joyful enlargement of their ideas and their capacity in this year's experience. At ten recent communion seasons, held in as many different churches of our city, an aggregate of three hundred and thirty persons were received on profession. And there has been less of what may properly be called excitement than we have ever witnessed in movements of equal power. Our pastors have not laid themselves out for great preaching efforts, summoning help from far and near. They have not exhausted themselves by overwork. In at least one case, where the additions were very numerous, the number might have been easily increased; but caution took the place of urgency with the church officers, and the whole series of preparatory services had as much the character of discrimination as of encouragement.

The good work has been going on in almost every part of our church. Regular and special efforts; preaching; Sabbath-school teaching, and the work of Evangelists have all alike been rewarded with no ordinary results. The labors of Mr. Hammond at Rochester and Lockport have created at least as great interest as ever before attended his preaching. They have differed from previous efforts, in being confined almost entirely to grown persons; and if any one acquainted only with those efforts, has been inclined to disparage Mr. Hammond, as showing no special gifts and

as accomplishing nothing more than might be expected with the tender and susceptible minds of children, he may learn from the power and success of these labors at Rochester and Lockport, to put a truer estimate upon his abilities. The very great service done by the secular press of these regions in the revival must not be overlooked as a proof of its power, and as a most encouraging instance of the ready subservency of worldly agencies to the cause of Christ.

Since the first of the year, considerably over one hundred churches of our branch have been reported in our columns as enjoying the special influences of the Spirit. These churches are distributed nearly evenly over the field occupied by our body. Fifty-four are found in New York State, principally in the centre and west, including three each, in the cities of Buffalo, Rochester, and New York, and one in Brooklyn. In Pennsylvania there are sixteen of these churches, including eight in this city; in Ohio twelve; in Indiana ten; in Illinois five, including one in Chicago; in New Jersey, Delaware and Iowa, each two; in South Carolina (Charleston) one; in California, (San Francisco) one, and in Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Nevada, each one; one hundred and eighteen in all.

Comparing this summary with our tabular statement of a year ago, we find that we then reported a total of one hundred and fifty seven churches; we think our figures for this year are more carefully made up, and except in Indiana, Illinois and Michigan, the results will be found far more substantial than in the reports of a year ago. In those three Western States we have reported this year an aggregate of but twenty-five revivals; last year there were forty-five, including some extraordinary instances of spiritual refreshing, as at Fort Wayne, Ind., where 242 were received on examination; and the little church of Marquette, where 78 were thus received. On the other hand, eight churches in our city last year reported 265 accessions on profession, ten this year report 330 such accessions. Last year but forty instances of revival were reported in the Empire State; this year we are privileged to report fifty-four, of much greater average strength. Last year the gracious movement began much earlier; this year we are still waiting definite news from some of the points of greatest interest. During the last two months we have rejoiced to chronicle just about twenty-three hundred additions—nearly all expressly described as such—on examination to our churches. And we are equally thankful to say, that our own prosperity is but a type of what is being enjoyed by every other Evangelical body in the country, at least in the northern part. We believe that the numerical strength of the Evangelical churches of America is from seventy-five to one hundred thousand greater than it was at the beginning of the year.

Thus for four successive years, in fact ever since the close of the war, the Holy Spirit has dwelt with special influences, and with unusual steadiness among the churches of our country. Do we not begin to see the days when, according to the prophet, "the ploughman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; when the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt?"

PRAYER FOR THE ASSEMBLIES.

There has been a world of discussion and a use of every human means to get and give light on the subjects to come before the coming Assemblies. We earnestly trust that appeals for higher wisdom have not been wanting, and that the spirit of prayer itself has mingled with discussion. Let us make these bodies, whose coming sessions will be among the most important of their history, a subject of daily public, private, and domestic prayer. Let us pray that they may have grace to act, or to refuse to act, as the interests of Christ's kingdom may require. Let us pray that they may have wisdom to do not merely what is good, but what is best; that they may show that Christian good sense and sagacity which prefers a greater good in the future to a lesser one in the present; and that whether a re-union is reached or not, mutual love may be promoted, Evangelical truth and Christian liberty may be alike honored, and the practical living union of God's people be advanced.

The melancholy scenes witnessed last week, in the U. S. Senate must go far to lower that body in the eyes of all who esteem courtesy, decency and order as among the first of parliamentary virtues. The worst of it is, that the two members were allowed to abuse each other most vilely without any interference from the chair. Mr. Anthony, Mr. Abbott and Mr. Sprague have all done their best to bring contempt upon the honored name of American Senator.

CURRENT TOPICS.

—The Spanish Cortes, by a large majority, have carried the articles of the new Constitution which provide for liberty of the press, freedom of meeting and association, and the right of petition. The articles on Church and State have not been voted on, at this writing.

—The *Osservatore Romano* says that Pius IX. is now engaged in negotiations with General Grant, with a view to sending a Nuncio to Washington. The prelate would not only represent the Court of Rome in the capital of the United States, but would also exercise an influence upon Catholicism in this country, which, in the opinion of the *Osservatore*, is destined to supersede all other religions, and to control the conscience of nine-tenths of the American people. Perhaps the *Osservatore* refers to the political conscience of our people when it uses such a magnificent fraction, and perhaps in that sense it does tell a truth of the past. As to the future—well, it does not cost anything to get up an opinion or utter a prophecy, but the rapid decline of Roman Catholic emigration justifies some skepticism at least in the matter.

—In one of his discourses in Lockport Mr. Hammond said: "Were the angel Gabriel to stand before you to-night he could not speak as ministers can. To illustrate the point: An Italian stood before an Avary, a place where birds are kept; going to the proprietor he asked the price of a bird and paid for it with a piece of gold; opening the cage he allowed it to soar away; he went to another cage and bought another bird; in the same way he freed it also. He bought them all and in turn set them free. The people gathered around and thought he was crazy. He told them, 'I too was once a prisoner.' So a minister can stand before you and say, 'I too was a prisoner, and point the way to freedom.' Thus ministers have more power than Gabriel."

—Amid not a little that is discouraging and indicative of actual retrogression in regard to the public observance of the Sabbath, it is most cheering to find, in the highest public position in the land, an example of reverence for the day, such as almost never before has been given. It is publicly announced, in connection with the schedule of business hours at the White House, that all business and visitors are to be "proscribed" on the Sabbath, "something which," the correspondent informs us, "has not been done for many years, if ever before." It is said that quite a number of less scrupulous Senators, on calling at the White House last Sunday morning were disappointed at not finding the President. He had made "a flank movement," and was spending the day quietly with a brother-in-law at Laurel, Md. What a relief to the whole nation will be a Sabbath-keeping President! What a relief to preachers and editors of religious papers, if the President will take off their hands the duty of reproving Sabbath-breaking politicians!

MATERNAL ASSOCIATION OF PHILADELPHIA.

This is composed of Christian ladies connected with the various Evangelical churches of our city. For several years they have sustained a monthly concert of prayer, so-called because in concert with other meetings in New York and elsewhere. These meetings are held on the first Wednesday of each month, at 3 o'clock, P. M., in the Lecture-room of the North Broad Street Presbyterian church (Rev. Dr. Stryker's). Although not largely attended, these gatherings are full of interest. The association supports a Bible Reader, and the reports presented by her and the statements of other working Christian ladies are full of thrilling interest.

An important feature of these meetings is the requests for prayer which are presented, the same requests oftentimes being carried over from month to month, and earnestly remembered until the pleasing intelligence is received, that the prayers offered up have been answered. These meetings are exclusively for ladies and their children. But occasionally some pastor is invited to preside, and told must be his heart if not touched with the earnest prayer and exhortations of these devoted Christian Sisters.

The next meeting will be held next Wednesday afternoon. We hope it will be largely attended by our pious ladies, and that they will not forget to take their children with them. Let the place be crowded with worshippers, and every heart will be overflowing with grace. P. S.

The *Christian Register* (Unitarian) says: "A new effort will be made to start another Unitarian society in Philadelphia. The Rev. Mr. Thorne, who has lately come out from the Presbyterian church, has been selected as the minister. A church edifice has been hired for a year, and the American Unitarian Association have appropriated one thousand dollars towards this object. We learn that the movement promises to be successful."

* NOTES CRITICAL AND EXPLANATORY ON THE BOOK OF PSALMS. By Albert Barnes, Author of "Notes Critical and Explanatory on the New Testament," "Lectures on the Evidences of Christianity," &c. In three volumes, 16mo. Pp. xlvii, 874; 883; 848. New York, Harper & Bros., Publishers.