

Saturday Night Talks
By F. E. DAVISON
Rutland, Vt.

THE VALUE OF LAY PREACHING

Feb. 28, '09—(Acts 8:14-25).

In the original church the idea seemed to be accepted that if any man felt called upon to preach the gospel he had a right to do it. Hence it came about that such men as Stephen the deacon, and Philip the evangelist, men who had never been called to the apostolic college, and set apart by the laying on of hands for this special work, assumed the right, inherent in every man to tell the story, and they did it mightily. In this lesson we see Philip, one of the deacons of the Jerusalem church, going up into Samaria, and starting a revival that swept everything before it, like a prairie fire. His work was just as efficient and just as acceptable as that which was done by the regularly ordained ministry.

Divine Credentials.

In these days, we are apt to look with suspicion upon the ministrations of any man who does not hold the credentials of ecclesiastical orders. A man may be dry as dust, but if he has been through college and theological seminary and had the hands of the presbytery put upon his head, we feel bound to listen to him, while the man who is his mental, physical, and spiritual superior is shut out of our pulpits because, forsooth, he does not carry in his pocket a diploma from Yale or ordination papers from the presbytery. Forgetful of the fact that if the Lord does not send men into the ministry, no canon of the church can shoot them into it, but if He has put His hand on a man's head, he is ordained, though his sacerdotal robe is a leather apron, and his pulpit an anvil.

Not Troops Enough.

We have made the mistake of supposing that this world can be converted by a few ministers. The trouble is not that the sword of the Spirit is dull. The difficulty is not that the great guns are of too short range to throw the bombshells into the enemy's camp. The trouble is, we have not troops enough to wield the sword of the Spirit, and to man the guns. Victory is promised to the church in the great battle of the ages, but not by distributing titles to the commanding officers, and expecting a few major-generals to go out and capture the foe. One man may chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, but what is needed is men enough to round up those stampeding forces and bring them into camp. The church is in too many instances carrying on a Peninsula campaign, marching "on to Richmond" and then marching back, its movements characterized by "masterly retreats."

Not enough men for the battle. It is a great farce this work of trying to save the world by a few clergymen. Peter the apostle, needs a striker in the person of Philip the evangelist. Jerusalem must have the gospel, but Samaria must not be neglected. A great central fire must be kindled in the capital city, but the conflagration will be more extensive if contributory flames are kindled in the surrounding country. And anybody that can strike a match can start a fire. There is such a thing as being too profound, and too heavy for the work of evangelism. The United States army has some high officers who are handicapped because they are too heavy to ride a horse. So there are men in the ministry more concerned about their grammar than the souls of their congregation, more interested in getting the right kind of sermon paper than in getting men right with God. Their sentences are Miltonic, they make their hearers stare but never repent. They read essays on the art of swimming to drowning men, they talk learnedly of fire escapes to those who are far out of reach of the ladders.

Pulpit Dreadnoughts.

You would not think of sending the Dreadnought up a mountain stream. These men are pulpit Dreadnoughts; they "draw too much water" to get into some of the places where Philip can paddle his canoe and come back having whipped the stream clean. We do not need fewer great guns, but a great host of sharpshooters. Not less parchments from the seminaries, but more leaves of healing among the nations. Not fewer church pulpits, but more street corner altars. Not a reduction of Major-Generals but a vast increase of privates. Not a retrenchment in great battleships but an amplification of torpedo boats. Not a subsidence of continental operations but an expansion of town, county and state movements. Phil Sheridan's raid in the Shenandoah is just as important as Sherman's march to the sea. Let not magnificent cathedral look down on the back alley mission. Religion will never make conquest of the world until consecrated laymen, plumbers, and ironers, and carpenters, and printers throttle the sins of their own trades. The church has been working the pumps of a few ministerial cisterns until the buckets are dry, while all around us are fountains of living waters from which may be dipped up the cool, sweet water of life. Let all hands lay hold, and carry this refreshing water to the dying multitudes.

A Life Hung on a Thread.

[Original.]

A good many years ago, when Indian fighting was the chief occupation of our then diminutive army, I was serving in the 7th cavalry at a western post. We had a man in the ranks who had been brought up by refined and wealthy parents, but who was a perfect devil. Egbert Carrol was the name he enlisted under, and I believe it was his real name. The only trouble with him was that he was too full of fight. One would suppose that a soldier can't have too much fight in him, and so he can't when there is an enemy to contend with, but when there isn't he is liable to turn upon his friends. Carrol was in Captain Cavanaugh's company, a man full of Irish blood, and that means full of Irish fight. We called him the "black god of war." The result was that when Carrol committed some slight indiscretion his captain, to speak figuratively, "put the screws on." This made Carrol rebellious, with the result of more discipline, till at last he mutinied and struck his captain. He was put in the guardhouse to await trial, but one dark night he escaped and disappeared.

It was not long after this that we had a brush with the Indians. We were getting the better of them when one of their number led them on a savage charge which for a time broke through our lines. I never saw such savage Indian fighting under so savage a leader. It was only a question of time with them, however, for we outnumbered them and were better armed and equipped. We took a lot of prisoners, among them their leader. Who should he be but Egbert Carrol?

Of course there was but one fate for him. A court martial was convened; he was tried and sentenced to be shot. The proceedings were forwarded to Washington, where they were approved by the president. The day having been fixed, there was nothing to do but wait for it to come round and carry out the sentence. But there was some sympathy for the condemned man. First, the commandant of the post believed there was not only stuff in him for a soldier, but a leader, which had been turned away by his captain, who had never learned to control himself, to say nothing of controlling others. Then the women of the post all took to him because he was a gentleman born. The men of his company partially excused him because many of them had suffered as he had from their captain's ungovernable temper. Lastly and most important, his family interested themselves to secure a pardon.

One day the colonel commanding a post some 200 miles eastward of the one where Carrol was held a prisoner received an order relieving the renegade. Selecting a good rider, the colonel gave him the president's order and told him to ride with it posthaste. But in the army there are many officers who would scorn to communicate the contents of an order to a private. The colonel was one of these. He sent his messenger away without any knowledge that a life hung on its prompt delivery. Two days after the messenger departed he returned to the man who sent him, confessing that he had stopped by the way to drink with some soldiers and had lost the order. He had returned for a duplicate.

The colonel blanched. "You scoundrel!" he roared. "You carried Carrol's reprieve. No power can repair the damage you have done. Before another message can be sent he will have been executed."

Now, it happened that I had been sent with a party to relieve the garrison of the station where the messenger had stopped, and it was with some of our men that the messenger drank and lost his order. He did not miss it till he had left the station and ridden some distance. Then he returned, hunted high and low for it and, not finding it, returned for its duplicate.

The day after the loss of the order I went to inspect a gang of men who were doing some work I was in charge of. While walking along the road I saw a dog chasing a bit of white paper which the breeze whirled before him. As the paper was blown past me I picked it up, held it over the dog and let it go again in the wind. The dog caught it and brought it to me for more play. It was then that I saw the word "Washington" printed on it. I read it and knew that it was Carrol's reprieve.

Within ten minutes I was mounted on the best horse at the station and riding to save a life. So much time had been lost in its transmission that I knew it was an even chance whether I arrived in time or not. I rode my horse to a finish in a few hours, secured another, exhausted him in about the same time and repeated the process as often as I could find horses.

I knew the day that Carrol was to be executed, but not the hour. It is singular that a soldier will drive the men under him up to be shot down unmercifully, but when under other circumstances one life is dependent on his efforts he will labor under a frightful burden.

At last I came in sight of the flag waving over the tops of some trees several miles in advance of me. Then every minute I dreaded lest I hear a volley. My horse was exhausted, and I feared every moment he would drop under me. He did so when within a quarter of a mile of the post. I ran on, waving the order above my head. A sentry saw it, guessed what it was and must have called out to those below, for I heard a cheer. Then I knew I was in time.

Carrol was killed during the civil war, having gained the reputation of being one of the daredevils of the Union army.

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