

## The Fireside.

### CAUSE AND EFFECT.

BY LEANDER S. KEYSER.

"What do you think of him?"

"Of the new minister?"

"Yes, certainly; he's the one subject of conversation in church circles just now. I should like to know your opinion of his sermon yesterday."

"Well, he's a good and pleasing speaker, and gets quite eloquent at times."

"But that isn't what I mean, Brother Hall. What did you think of the subject-matter of his discourse?"

"I don't like to talk about anyone, especially about a minister; but since you've asked me, I will say frankly that I never heard such a sermon. Most of the time I couldn't make out what he meant. He wasn't clear. First he hinted at something, and then he modified it, so that he seemed to be taking it back."

"What do you suppose he meant by saying that the first two chapters of Genesis were 'legendary'?"

"That mystified me, I confess. It was just a word, of course, a kind of parenthesis in the midst of the sermon, but I must say it upset me."

"And didn't you notice that he used the phrase 'Biblical criticism' several times? One of his assertions struck me as very peculiar; it was something like this: 'The value of Biblical criticism lies in the fact that it enables us to determine what is inspired in the Scriptures.' Of course he didn't add, 'and what is not inspired,' but that was plainly to be inferred."

"Yes, I noticed that, too, and it made the cold chills run up my back. It looks as if we were going to have a new kind of preaching in St. Matthew's, judging from the opening discourse."

The speakers were two of the leading members of St. Matthew's church. They had met on the street on Monday morning, and it will be seen from their conversation that their new pastor, the Rev. James Newton Walden, had stirred some questions in their minds by his sermon on the preceding day. The Rev. Mr. Walden, it must be said, was critical, if he was anything. When he read a literary work, he read it with his critical glasses on, and his criticism was often so minute and so much affected by his subjective moods and tempers that it might well have been called finicism. From what has been said by his two parishioners, Messrs. Hall and Landis, it appears that he carried his critical faculty into his study of the Bible, and then took his scalpel with him into the pulpit.

For a few Sundays he was prudently chary and conservative, evidently feeling his way, and some things he said were quite like the old-fashioned preaching we've been hearing right along in our pulpit," as Mr. Hall phrased it. But one Monday morning, about five weeks after the Rev. Mr. Walden's advent into the city, Mr. Landis hurried over to Mr. Hall's place of business at an early hour.

"Good morning, Brother Landis. You are certainly the early bird this morning."

"I'm afraid I haven't caught a luscious morsel, though," rejoined Brother Landis, with a forced smile, his lips quivering. "I've come over to talk to you about the sermons yesterday."

"I knew it, brother, the moment you stepped into the door."

"Well, what do you think?"

"I'm so dumfounded I can scarcely think at all."

"I don't wonder. I'm in the same mental state. Why, Mr. Walden said that the story of the fall of man, as described in the second chapter of Genesis, was 'only a pretty and ingenious piece of fiction designed to teach us an important lesson, just as writers compose moral purpose novels to-day!' Didn't he say that?"

He did; you've quoted him verbatim."

"He also said that the story of the flood was evidently borrowed from the legends and traditions of some other nations. Then he added—I believe I can quote this sentence, too, for it has gone deep into my soul: 'While we cannot accept the story of the flood as history, yet we must learn its lesson, the lesson its author meant to teach—that God will surely save the righteous and punish the wicked.'"

"What a memory you have, Brother Landis! That's precisely what he said."

"Well, Brother Hall, what do you think of such doctrine?"

"I don't know what to think. I can only tell how I felt while he was saying those things—that, if the Bible can't be believed, there was nothing to tie to. I seemed to be cut loose from all my moorings and cast adrift upon the ocean without star, compass, chart, or rudder."

"Just so, Brother Hall, just so. This is the way I reasoned it out: If the Bible can't be relied on as history, how can it be relied on at all? It leaves an awfully slender basis for faith to rest on. No 'infallible rule of faith and practice' in such a view. Ah, I'm fearing this new critic-preacher of ours is preaching human reason rather than the gospel, and is undermining the faith of our people. What can be done?"

The two men talked long and earnestly, and at last decided to keep quiet for a while and await developments. As time went on discussion grew rife in St. Matthew's church. There were hot controversies about the Bible, its authenticity and inspiration, and for the time the church was converted into a veritable debating school. So much time was spent in arguing that there was little left for anything else. The new rationalism soon crept into the Sunday-school. One day the minister was giving a review of the lesson, and attempted to answer the question, "What must I do to be saved?" This is part of what he said:

"You cannot be saved by putting your trust in a book"—here he laid his hand significantly on the Bible—"but by trusting in Christ, and Christ alone!" and he lifted his hand toward the sky.

This was more than Mr. Landis, who was somewhat impulsive, could stand. He rose and said, his voice trembling a little:

"Brother Walden, where do we learn about Christ?"

A look of annoyance swept over the minister's face, and he said, with all ill-concealed air of impatience, "In the gospel, of course."

"But suppose those gospel histories are not reliable, how can we know that we really have a Christ to trust in?"

By that time the room had become so

quiet that a leaf rustling near an open window seemed to make a loud noise.

"Part of the gospel history is reliable, enough to give us a clear conception of Christ; the rest is not reliable."

"But how am I to know which is true and which is not true?"

A superior, almost a supercilious, smile came to the Rev. Mr. Walden's face as he flung back this retort, which was meant to be a crusher:

"You must use your brains, my brother; that's what they were given you for."

This sally created a ripple of laughter among some of the young people, but Mr. Landis, having got his courage up, determined not to let himself be downed by a little piece of buffoonery. So he replied:

"The Bible says that 'the gospel is the power of God unto salvation,' but it would seem that our pastor would like to change it to, 'We're saved by brains!' and with that retort Brother Landis sat down, and the laugh seemed to be turned on the minister."

One day, while Mr. Landis and his friend, Mr. Hall, were in conversation in the former's office, a well-known infidel of the same city came in. An exultant look sat on his face.

"How d'you do, gentlemen?" he cried. "I see you're getting your heads together. I don't wonder, either," he added, winking slyly. "That preacher of yours is giving you something to think about these days, isn't he?"

"You've been to hear him, I believe."

"Yes, indeed; several times. He's quite refreshing. I like to hear him flay orthodoxy and orthodox people; he does it to a finish—nothing but a few shreds left. It amuses me immensely, too, to see him slice up and pare down the old book that you people have been clinging to so stubbornly. He's an expert in that line. It makes me almost shout sometimes to see you old fellows squirming in your pews. Ha! ha! It's equal to a circus, it is, indeed!"

At that moment Mr. Landis had a happy thought, which was suggested to him by the unbeliever's raillery.

"By the way, Brother Maxwell," he said, for he "brothered" everybody, "since you like our pastor so well and believe in his doctrines, why don't you come right along and join our church?"

The infidel burst into a spasm of uproarious laughter.

"Well, that's rich," he cried. "I didn't think you were capable of so much wit, Mr. Landis. As for joining your church or any other, that's absurd. If the Bible is such an unreliable book, so full of error as your minister intimates, what's the use in holding on to it at all and having a church? If so much of the Bible must go, then it all goes, and the church goes with it. That's the way I reason it out."

"But see here," Mr. Maxwell, persisted the churchman, "our minister preaches that we must come to Christ and be saved. Don't you feel that you ought to come to him?"

"My dear sir, that sounds like cant, if you will pardon such plain speech," returned the infidel. "If the Bible," which is the only book which purports to give the history of Christ, is not trustworthy, how can any one regard the Christ it tells about as trustworthy, eh? That's logic, isn't it? Good day, gentlemen. This conversation is becoming a little too personal;" and he turned on his heel and walked out of the office.

"So that's the way our preacher's doctrine works on the infidel, is it?" murmured Mr. Landis.

During the summer there were no accessions to the church, Mr. Walden

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being too busy with his criticism and dissection and finespun distinctions to preach to sinners or take any interest in them. The congregation also dwindled.

"If everything is in such a state of chaos about the Bible, what's the use of going to church?" was the logic employed in one form or another by every absentee.

When winter came several of the active members of the church asked Mr. Walden whether he meant to hold special evangelistic services for the unsaved.

"I don't believe in such meetings," he declared, dogmatically.

"Don't believe in meetings for bringing the unsaved to Christ?" exclaimed an old brother in dismay. "What do you believe in, then?"

"In the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man!" Mr. Walden replied, loftily.

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