

LESSON II.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE II.

THE SERMON : ITS GENERIC IDEA.

5th. Continuing the discussion of the generic idea of a sermon, we notice a fifth thesis ; namely, that a sermon is an oral address to the popular mind, upon religious truth as contained in the Scriptures, *and elaborately treated*. A sermon must be distinguished from certain forms of religious discourse, from which it does not differ except in point of elaboration. A religious exhortation, for instance, is not a sermon. A part of a sermon it may be ; but hortation standing alone is not preaching. Informal remarks in a meeting for religious conference are not a sermon. Woven into a sermon they may be ; but isolated they are not preaching. A sermon is a structure : it is something put together with care. It has unity, coherence, proportion, a beginning, a middle, and an end. As a literary production, it has a philosophical construction as truly as a tragedy or an epic poem.

How is this theory of the essential elaborateness of a sermon to be reconciled with the apparent power of spontaneous preaching ? Dr. James Alexander repeats the experience of every pastor, when he expresses his surprise at the failure of his most costly efforts as compared with his extemporaneous effusions. How is this to be reconciled, can it indeed be reconciled, with the

theory here advanced of the necessary elaborateness of all pulpit discourse?

(1) I answer, by observing that the power of spontaneous preaching is often overrated. Often it is not true that such preaching has great relative power. We are all liable to a delusion in our judgment of this, and none more so than the preacher himself, who has every possible inducement, every temptation I may say, to see evidences which do not exist of effects from such preaching. Some subtle infirmities of human nature are gratified by the conviction that such preaching does accomplish the work of the pulpit. The temptation it presents is very insidious to dignify by the name of Christian simplicity that which is commonplace in thought, shallow in feeling, and ephemeral in effect. Let us, then, be honest with ourselves, and see this thing as it is. In the pulpit, as everywhere else, the presumption is always against the efficiency of any thing which costs the producer little. The facts of life confirm this presumption. Preaching, which is really the fruit of a mind at ease, does not end in powerful results. Profound impressions do not come from such sermons. Permanent impressions do not. Impressions formative of character do not. Impressions upon the strongest characters are from no such preaching. I speak now of the law of the pulpit respecting this thing, not of anomalous exceptions.

Much is often said and made of weeping in an audience. We overrate this. Tears are not evidence of the profoundest emotions. They are not more so in religion than in other things. They are sometimes nothing but a nervous luxury. They are not wholly beyond the stimulus of the will. A man weeps less easily as his sensibilities deepen with time, and his char

acter sloughs off self-delusions. Old age is very apt to be tearless. The dying almost never weep. In a public speaker tears are an infirmity to be got rid of, never a gift to be vain of. Audiences which are habitually moved to the weeping mood are not those in which the most healthful piety is forming under the ministrations of the pulpit. Their religious experience is in danger of settling into a routine of theatric sensibility. I once saw a German audience weeping under an exclamatory sermon such as would scarcely be tolerated in an American conference-meeting. The greater part of that audience, I was informed, were present at the theatre in the evening of the same day. It may be reasonably doubted whether such would have been the case, if the sermon had given them any thing to think of, instead of the luxury of a few tears.

The criticism of men of the world upon the habits of religious people is worth reading, if not heeding. A critic in the "Saturday Review" thus discourses: "The assumption that a ready command of lachrymal secretions is a sign of virtue is very common among a large class of people. . . . They find a sweet relish in comparing their own sensitiveness with the aridity of other folk. . . . This worship of demonstrative sensibility is one of the most silly and mischievous superstitions of modern times. . . . The fact is, that the sort of sensibility which is very close upon crying is in great degree constitutional. Some people are born with weaker nerves and softer susceptibilities than others, as some are born with red, and some with black hair. The fact has no moral significance either way. Hearts worn upon the sleeve are not the most delicate and sensitive." Such is the strong and rather stern good sense which the pulpit must encounter among

men of the world. It is not apt to be very tolerant of moist preachers and paralytic audiences.

(2) The genuine power of spontaneous preaching is very largely a reflection of the power of elaborate discourse. The first owes its existence to the second. You will not have been very long in the ministry when you will discover the worth of your own history in the pulpit. That which you say there you will find interpreted by that which you have said. That which you do will be received with the weight of that which you have done. That which you preach will go to the people with the momentum of that which you have been found to *do*. Your character will energize your words. This history of every preacher, and of his pulpit, is always to be taken into the account in judging of the efficiency of single sermons.

Apply this principle, for a moment, to the spontaneous sermon. The effect of such a sermon often indicates only that the preacher's present effort carries the weight of his history. One great sermon will overshadow and protect many small ones. Still more successfully will strong preaching as the rule bear up weak preaching as the exception. The truth is, that any great art, to be sustained in its weak points, must have its strong points. In all varieties of power there is a class of petty, one may almost say frivolous, instrumentalities which seem to have more power than they have, because of this secret suction of strength from richer resources. They can never be wisely depended on, to the neglect of those richer resources. They can not be even what they honestly are, without the cultivation of those resources. They are scintillations which can not have even their momentary glare, without the solid, massive, heated globes from which they emanate. As

there can not be a parody without a poem, so there can be no preaching impromptu without elaborate sermonizing to keep the pulpit alive, and to make preaching respectable enough to command a hearing for its inferior effusions.

(3) Another view of the subject of spontaneous preaching remains, which is the most vital of all. It is, that apparently spontaneous trains of thought are often the result of the most severe elaboration. Frequently that which seems to be preaching "offhand" is any thing but that. It is preceded by most laborious, and, as related to the subjects in hand, most masterly, mental processes. Years of culture are behind it. It is the ripened fruit of thoughts which struggled into the mind's life years before, and which have been mellowing there ever since.

Two classes of these ripened materials are observable in sermons of the kind now in question. One is that of strong thought, which has lost its appearance of elaboration through the long familiarity of the preacher's mind with it. He has revolved it, and dissected it, and pursued it into lateral relations, and experimented with the uses of it, till he knows it all, around and all through. The choice aspects of it he recalls on the instant. The lights and shadows of it are all pictured in his mind's eye. Fragments and connections of it which are useless for popular impression he knows, and therefore he knows when to let them alone. His perception of it now has the quickness of intuition; but was it intuition at the first? His use of it now has the spontaneity of genius; but was it genius originally? His preaching of it now has the facility of nature. There seems to be no science, no art, no study, no toil, about it. The truth seems just to flow to him and

through him by natural inspiration. Verily he has "opened his mouth and taught them, saying." But was he always inspired thus? Not at all. He has reached his present mental possession of that truth by some of the most elaborate mental processes of his life; but the elaboration is out of sight, perhaps forgotten by the preacher himself. The delving and the boring and the blasting are finished; and now the fountain gushes out, the freest and easiest and freshest thing in nature, just because the vein has been struck. It is only a play upon words to exalt such preaching as opposed to or different from elaborated sermons.

But often there is another element in such preaching, more valuable than any intellectual fruitage, yet indicative of elaboration of the severest and profoundest quality. It is that of thought which has grown rich in the mind of the preacher through his own long experience of it in his own character. No other elements of truth are so thoroughly at a man's command as elements like these. If he is a true man, he is living them every hour. The preaching of such truths is the nearest approach one can make to the discourses of Christ. No wonder that it is has power. But is there no elaboration lying back of such power? The most intense and the most intricate elaboration of truth is involved in those mental processes by which character is formed and consolidated. As no other product of thought equals character, so no other discipline is so severe or so complicated, so ingenious or so artful, as the hidden discipline by which character matures. No matter whether the preacher has derived his experience of the truth from the stimulus of books or not, the essential point is that his mind has gone through the process of revolutionary struggle in coming to its present com-

mand of the truth he preaches. He is but a half-formed man, if he has not discovered this, and if he therefore decries elaborate sermons as something unlike his own. If his is not elaborate preaching, there is no such preaching.

You can all easily test the truth of the views here advanced, by your own experience, real or probable. Suppose that you were driven in an emergency to preach without present preparation. You are on a journey. On the Sabbath morning you are placed in circumstances in which you must preach, or be cowardly, through fear for your reputation. You have no written sermon which is accessible: you must preach extemporaneously. You have only the time in which the devotional services are in progress to cast your thoughts into order, and choose a text. What sort of a text will you certainly choose in such an exigency? what kind of subject? what train of thought? Will they be text, theme, thoughts, wholly novel to you, unexplored, untried, undigested? or will they be materials which are familiar to you? Most surely, if you are a man of sense, they will be the latter. You will instinctively select a channel in which your mind has been used to flowing, and in which, therefore, it flows easily and naturally. You will, in other words, choose a theme on which your mind has a history, an experience either of intellect or of heart, or of both; and that history, if it is worth any thing to anybody, has cost you something. You have toiled for it; you have struggled for it; you have given time to it; you have suffered mental failures about it: in short, you have elaborated it. When, therefore, at the close of the service, you see evidence that good has been done by your preaching, perhaps a soul awakened or converted, do

not set it down to the credit of simple preaching as opposed to intellectual preaching. Do not be beguiled into a lazy ministry. Rest assured that such preaching is truly useful just in proportion to its cost in previous labor. Up to the extreme border of your own hard-bought experience, you can preach thus with power. beyond that border, such preaching is the weakest of all possible dilutions. When it ceases to be an experience, and becomes an imitation, it wins no hearts, because it commands no respect. The pulpit which then depends upon it for results dies out, and no man mourns. For the reasons thus given, we insert into the very definition of a sermon, as belonging to the generic idea of the thing, that it must be a structure, and therefore the fruit of elaboration.

6th, A sermon is an oral address to the popular mind, upon religious truth contained in the Scriptures, and elaborately treated *with a view to persuasion*. This assigns the sermon to the loftiest form of rhetorical discourse. It distinguishes preaching, also, from two species of composition from which it is not otherwise entirely distinct.

(1) One of these is poetry. Poetry and preaching may have numerous resemblances. Both may be orally delivered. Homer chanted the Iliad. The poetic drama is constructed primarily with reference to oral utterance. Both may be addressed to the popular mind. The ballads of all literatures are thus addressed. Italian improvisators address their poetic effusions to the populace. Both may be upon religious themes, upon biblical themes, upon themes elaborately treated. For all these qualities, Milton hoped for the "Paradise Lost" an undying fame. Madame de Staël, in "Corinne," represents some of the ephemeral productions of the im-

provisators as finished specimens of literature. A poem, then, may possess every feature which has been remarked as essential to homiletic discourse, except one. Poetry and preaching differ in the conscious aim of the speaker. All forms of poetry differ from all forms of oratory in the fact that a preacher always consciously aims at the persuasion of the hearer, while a poet never does so. The essential idea of poetry is a vexed theme of literary criticism. After all that has been said and written upon it, I find the essential idea of poetry in the spontaneity of its utterance of truth in rhythmic forms. Popular criticism very nearly hits this principle, when it speaks of poetical productions as poetical effusions. Poetry floats in an element of emotion. It flows unbidden: it comes into life in speech because it must come. Being the expression of a soul so full of its thought that it utters the thought for its own sake, poetry represents no consciousness of design to move the will of reader or hearer. Hence in the ancient criticism the poet was the creator: he wrought only for self-expression. Something of the unconsciousness of inspired seers clings to all the ideas which the ancient critics had of the genius of poetry.

To this view it may be plausibly objected, "What of certain popular ballads which have moved masses of men to a purpose? What of revolutionary ballads like the Marseillaise Hymn? What of certain battle-songs like that of Gustavus Adolphus?" These have so thrilled and moved to action armies and nations, that they rank among the most persuasive powers in literature: is there, then, no persuasive aim in their construction? I answer, none, so far as the consciousness of the poet is concerned in the act of composing. The recorded experience of poets confirms this theory. Such

productions never come into life by conscious design: they always burst upon the world as a surprise,—as much a surprise to their authors as to any one else. No man ever creates such a hymn who sets about it with conscious aim. This theory is confirmed by the history of the best specimens of religious hymnology. The choicest hymns of all languages, which have lifted the Christian Church to heaven in the service of song, have not been created with any such conscious design. Their moving of the world was in the divine purpose, not in the human purpose, of their construction. They all breathe an atmosphere of solitude. Intense individualism in communion with God characterizes them. “*My faith looks up to Thee*” is the keynote of their production. Listening and sympathizing and participating and obedient audiences are as much out of mind as out of sight, when such immortal hymns come to their birth. Only the Spirit of God then moves upon the face of the waters.

On the other hand, the least impressive fragments of all our hymnological literature are the expostulatory and comminatory hymns. They are not poetry: they are only preaching in meter. A perfect taste rejects them. In the nature of things, an exhortation to repentance is not meant to be sung. A multitude of our religious melodies, popular in revivals of religion, come under this condemnation. A perfected spiritual taste, and a perfected æsthetic taste as well, eschew them. The time is coming when our hymn-books for use in the public service of song will be expurgated of every thing which is not a spontaneous outflow of some form of communion with God. A hymn-book limited to the loftiest songs of worship would be as perfect in poetic quality as in spiritual experience. In both

Ed. Note:

It is not always true that the composers of gospel songs write with no aim to bringing about repentance or some other biblical change in the listeners. At least in the present day, 2010, some do and the songs are quite effective tools in bringing the biblical message to the hearts of the listeners and effecting a change of mind, attitude, or heart. This is especially effective if this initial implantation through the music is then followed up with preaching with the same aim in mind. The two working together are most effective in bringing about change in the listeners.

However, in general the view espoused by brother Phelps is a correct one with, as I stated above, some few exceptions.

Dr. VBK

respects it would be a reproduction of the Psalms of the Old Testament, in which but one solitary instance occurs of expostulatory threatening. Since these pages were written, I have been confirmed in the views they advance of the nature of true poetry by discovering an expression by Goethe on the same subject. He says, "Poetry is the spontaneous effluence of a soul absorbed in its own inspirations."

What, now, is the distinctive feature of oratory as compared with poetry? It is the ascendancy over every thing else of that which does not exist at all in poetry; namely, the conscious aim at persuasion. In poetry, the audience is nothing: in oratory, the audience is every thing. In poetry, therefore, persuasion finds no place: in oratory, it commands every place. Preaching, therefore, excludes every thing which is not either persuasion, or a tributary to persuasion. In the consciousness of the preacher in the act of preaching, and in the consciousness of the hearer in the act of listening, this aim at persuasion is everywhere and always felt. Nothing is preaching of which this is not true: nothing is eloquence of which this is not true. Eloquence is always an aim at a mark, never a solitary self-expression. As Daniel Webster defined it, it is "always a progress on, right on, to an object." That object in the end is always the same, — persuasion. In true preaching, therefore, argument is never used for the sake of the argument; illustration, never for the sake of the illustration; ornament, never for the sake of the ornament. These are always means to an end, and the end is persuasion. The more elaborate they are, if true to their purpose, the more faithfully tributary they are to the one end, and the more powerful is the impetus they give to the movement of discourse towards that end.

The broader the sweep of the circle, the more irresistible is the momentum of the descent, and the more concentrated the unity of the blow struck.

(2) The second of the two species of composition from which the present thesis distinguishes preaching is that species of prose composition in which the only object is either intellectual or emotive. Some compositions there are which combine every requisite of a sermon except this, of aim at the will of a hearer. Some discourses in the pulpit are purely instructive in their aims: knowledge is communicated for the sake of the knowledge, and nothing more. Others are purely imaginative: feeling is wrought upon by imaginative art, for the luxury of the feeling, and nothing more. The question arises, then, Are these productions sermons? The answer, strictly speaking, must be in the negative. The immediate object of a sermon may be instruction, or the excitement of emotion, or both; but the ultimate object is neither. True eloquence, and therefore true preaching, always foreshadow the persuasion of the hearer as their final aim. They may not disclose the thing to which he is to be persuaded; but they must disclose the fact of something to which he is to be persuaded. In a series of sermons, for instance, the applicatory persuasion may lie at the end of the series; but its beginning and middle will breathe the spirit of the coming persuasive process. That is living in the consciousness of the preacher, and the whole line of the discussion will vibrate with it. The discussion exists for it and for nothing else.

Herein lies the vital distinction between the pulpit and the stage. Theatric discourse, in its purest and most lofty purpose, stops short of the persuading of a hearer. It may amuse, it may instruct, it may rouse

emotion, it may play indefinitely back and forth between intellect and sensibility; but it does not persuade. It is busy with the intellectual faculties, it plays with the sensibilities; it riots among the passions; but there it ends. It does not move upon the will as the grand point to be carried by dramatic appeal. Just here the pulpit and stage are at antipodes to each other. On the stage, the will of the hearer is nothing; the intellect and sensibilities every thing. In the pulpit, the will is every thing; the intellect and sensibilities nothing but tributaries.

Yet this distinction condemns certain varieties of discourse which are often heard in pulpits. Some discourses are essentially theatric in their aim. They instruct, and that only; they sport with the imagination, and that only; they play with the feelings, and that only. Specially in certain forms of argumentative discourse is the theatric quality obvious. It marks the chief distinction between two classes of argumentative preachers. One preacher discourses as if he felt, and he makes his audience feel, that his argument is the all in all. He argues for the sake of the intellectual treat; he communicates the knowledge for the sake of the knowledge; he tasks the intellect for the sake of the strain; and that is the whole of it. The being of God, and the necessity of an Atonement, he proves as Agassiz would have lectured on an Amazonian fish or the glacial theory. Another preacher will appear to feel, and will make his audience feel, that his argument is a preliminary; his use of the intellect is an instrument; the whole argumentative process is a means to an end; and the whole discourse is alive and tremulous with the consciousness of that end. He proves an Atonement as he would build a raft, or man a life-boat, for drowning

men. This eager on-looking to the end in all the intellectual processes of the pulpit is to preaching what the circulation of the blood is to the vital powers of the body. If it languishes, life languishes: when it ceases, life goes out. Therefore the persuasive aim enters into the very definition of a **sermon**.