

LESSON IV.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE IV.

THE TEXT: HISTORY, USES.

THE first thing which attracts the attention of a critic of pulpit discourse is the custom of founding it upon selections of inspired words. It will aid us in obtaining the true theory of the text as a part of pulpit discourse, to consider, in the first place:—

I. Some notices of the history of the custom of employing texts. The sources of information on this topic are not fertile. Objections to the custom are almost wholly of modern origin. At least, if objections existed in the early Church, they have not lived in historic records of opinion.

1st, We may observe, first, the Jewish origin of the custom. It had its birth, unquestionably in the old Jewish reverence for the letter of the word of God. What, then, was the position of the text in the Jewish idea of a religious discourse? In the earliest Jewish worship the text was the chief part of the discourse. Being originally a direct communication from God, it absorbed all the interest of a hearer in itself. When first revealed, it must have stood alone, without enlargement, without comment. The very words of God, and no other, were the first sermon. Large portions of the Scriptures of those times were chosen as the themes of meditation in the temple. Preaching, other than the

reading of the law and the prophets, can scarcely be said to have existed. The nearest approximation to it was simply the interpretation of the passage which had previously been read. In the Jewish idea, the inspired text is the sermon; comment upon it, an appendage. More than this prevailed subsequently in the later worship of the synagogue. Our Saviour and some of the Apostles made the reading of the law in the synagogue an occasion of extended exposition and hortation. Their doing so excited no surprise among the Jews, it being already an established usage among them. Still, the central idea of preaching was exposition. The inspired text was the center of interest.

2d, Observe, secondly, the transfer of the custom of employing texts, from Jewish to Christian usage. Apostolic usage was not uniform. The Apostles often preached without texts. An evident reason for this is found, as in the case of our Lord himself, in the fact that they were themselves inspired teachers. But we find no trace of preaching without a text among the immediate successors of the Apostles. The instant that inspiration ceased, the Jewish reverence for the inspired records was revived, and the only model of preaching known for some centuries was the homily; that is, as we should call it, a practical exposition, or, as the Scotch clergy would term it, an expository lecture. Sometimes several homilies were preached on one occasion, each occupying from six to twelve minutes. The stymology of the word "text" suggests very nearly the ancient idea of its relation to the homily: it was *textus* (woven in), the warp and woof of the whole production.

3d, Observe, thirdly, the Romish corruption of the custom of employing texts. In this period of the his-

tory of the custom several things are noticeable. The allegorical principles of interpretation applied to the Scriptures by Origen and others after him destroyed the legitimate force of the custom. It destroyed logical connection between text and homily. A text which is torn from its connections in inspired usage, or to which an imaginary sense is given, is r.o text. This was largely true of the use of texts in the time of Augustine. It was the taste of the age to make a text mean any thing that was convenient, or fancifully attractive, or more especially any thing that should seem to support the dominant philosophy of the times. The Protestant pulpit owes nearly all the¹ puerility, and the unscholarly license which it tolerates in the interpretation and uses of texts, to that period in which grammatico-historical exegesis was abandoned, and the mystical interpretation took its place.

Moreover, the unsettling of the inspired canon at that time corrupted the sources of texts. The consequence was that sermons were often preached upon passages from apocryphal sources. The reverence for philosophy also weakened the clerical reverence for texts of the Scriptures. In many instances it was deemed a matter of indifference whether texts were chosen from inspired sources or not. Melancthon says that they were sometimes taken from the ethics of Aristotle. This was perfectly natural. A forced interpretation of inspired language brings it into conflict with the common sense of men. In such a conflict, no language can hold its place in the reverence of the human mind. When it had become the usage of the pulpit to employ a biblical text as no other language would be seriously employed by a sane mind, it was an improvement to turn from St. Paul to Aristotle, whose language had not

1. puerility, def. childishness, immaturity

yet undergone distortion. As a consequence of the corruption of texts, some of the Fathers preached without a text. This, too, was a natural result. Here and there a vigorous thinker would revolt from the puerility of the schoolmen, and throw off all trammels upon free discourse. Some of the sermons of Chrysostom were preached without a text. Augustine preached over four hundred sermons without texts.

During this period the topical sermon came into existence. For the first twelve centuries of the Christian era, the restriction of the text to an isolated verse, or fragment of a verse, of the Bible was unknown. The topical sermon, therefore, was an innovation. Originally the Christian sermon was an exposition, and only that. In England it was called, for some centuries, "postillating." The only kind of preaching which varied from it was that of preaching without a text, and which was called "declaring;" that is, the preacher "declared" his subject and discussion without explaining any text.

The assertion that the use of texts met with no important dissent is not true of such a use of the text as the topical sermon creates. The restriction of the text to a verse, or a fragment of a verse, which is common in the modern topical discourse, met with very strenuous opposition for two hundred years. It originated about 1200 A. D.; and the older clergy of that date contested it stoutly. Among others, Roger Bacon wrote against it with great severity. He prayed God to "banish this conceited and artificial way of preaching from his Church." The notion of the topical sermon which he entertained was a singular one. It lets us into the clerical life of the times significantly. He writes, "The greatest part of our prelates, having but little knowledge in divinity, and having been little used

to preaching in their youth, when they become bishops, and are sometimes obliged to preach, are under the necessity of begging and borrowing the sermons of certain novices, who have invented a new way of preaching, by endless divisions and quibblings, in which there is neither sublimity of style, nor depth of wisdom. . . . It will never do any good." Thus judged one of the wisest men of his age, of a style of preaching which has been the predominant one in this country, and specially in New England, for two hundred years, and in which are to be found the most valuable contributions to theology which this country has produced. To the foregoing facts should be added, that preaching itself, during the period of the Romish decline, gradually fell into disuse. Indolence in the priesthood, and superstition in the Church displaced the pulpit, and exalted the altar.

4th, The modern period in the history of the custom of employing texts dates from the Reformation. It is characterized by three features which deserve mention.

(1) We find a return to the ancient usage respecting the sources of texts. The unanimity of the reformers in this regard is remarkable. I have met with no evidence of a solitary instance in which any other than a biblical source was acknowledged by them in the choice of a text. The religious vitality of the Reformation is indicated in no other one thing so signally as in this backward spring from human to inspired authorities, in the search for a preacher's texts.

(2) Another feature which characterizes this period is a similar return to the ancient simplicity in the interpretation of texts. This movement was more gradual, and not universal. But the tendency of modern scholarship for three centuries has been to settle the interpre-

tation of texts on the same principles of grammatico-historical exegesis by which common sense interprets the language of any other ancient volume.

(3) A third feature by which this modern period is characterized is a variety of usage respecting the objects for which texts are employed. The etymological idea of a text is not now universal in the usage of the pulpit. Modern sermons are more than homilies. Discussion of subjects independently of texts has grown upon modern usage immensely. As familiarity with the Scriptures is extended among the people, the effect must necessarily be to throw the pulpit forward upon more elaborate discussions for the materials of sermons. Still we have not reached any uniformity of usage in reference to the objects of texts: it is to be hoped that no such uniformity will be established. We need the present diversity to meet diverse wants of the popular mind.

II. We proceed now to observe briefly some of the objections to the custom of employing texts. Of these the following are the chief. It is claimed that the custom tends to attenuate the material of a sermon. Voltaire, for this reason, expressed the wish that Bourdaloue had banished this custom from the pulpit. It is urged further that the custom tends to create pedantic methods of preaching. Sismondi, in his "History of the Italian Republics," attributes the decay of secular eloquence in Italy to the loss of clerical eloquence from the pulpit, occasioned by the priesthood in preaching from texts. Moreover, it is said that the custom tends to contract the range of the subjects of the pulpit. Vinet, in urging this objection, says very truly. "Experience is a book. Experience furnishes texts." The question is a fair one, then. Shall a preacher cram his

experience to bring the themes of his pulpit within the range of scriptural texts? Again: it is objected that the custom tends to isolate the pulpit from the usages of secular eloquence. It is a fair inquiry, Why do not secular orators employ texts, or their equivalent? May not the proverbial dullness of a sermon be attributable, in part, to an unnatural separation between the pulpit and the bar, or the Senate, in this respect? Might not something of the vivacity of the platform be given to the pulpit, if the formula of a text were abandoned?

This suggests a further objection: that the custom tends to stiffen the routine of the pulpit. Claus Harms, in his work on "Practical Theology," expresses the opinion that this custom has been prejudicial, "not only to the perfection of preaching as an art, but also to Christian knowledge, and, what is more serious, to the Christian life." It is a reasonable query, What is to prevent the use of a text from degenerating into an utterly lifeless form? Is it not often like the address and subscription of a letter, — a form which the hearer feels to be void of meaning? If so, is it not all the worse for its inspired origin? Finally, William Lloyd Garrison urges against the custom its tendency to antiquate the pulpit. He claims that it assumes antiquity to be synonymous with authority; that it promotes silence upon existing forms of sin on the plea of fidelity to an ancient type of thought and of religious experience. In a word, it tends to give to the past a moral ascendancy over the present, to which nothing in the experience of the past entitles it, and which is not commended by the example of Christ and the Apostles.

Respecting all these objections, I can not but think that something must, in candor, be conceded to them. Vinet puts the case fairly when he imagines a stranger,

unacquainted with the usages of the pulpit, and knowing only its object, as listening for the first time to a sermon, and learning that this entire department of eloquence is subjected to the rule of developing, not the idea of the speaker, but a text clipped from a foreign discourse. Would the usage, to such a stranger, appear to be a natural one? If there were not opposing advantages attending the use of texts, or even if the abuses indicated by objectors were inevitable, the custom would not be worth defending. It is not enjoined on the pulpit by inspired authority. It must exist, if at all, on its intrinsic merits. The revulsion of some minds from it is not unnatural in view of the puerilities to which it has often given rise. Still the custom will be found to be defensible on the ground that its abuses are not unavoidable, and its uses are of surpassing moment.

III. In defense of the custom of employing texts, we proceed, then, to consider the positive uses of texts. These demand consideration in a twofold aspect. They are advantages supporting the custom of employing texts: they are also objects to be aimed at in the selection of texts. That is the best text which secures the largest number, and the most vital, of the objects of having a text.

1st, Of the positive uses of texts, may be named, first, that of giving inspired authority to the sentiments of a sermon. This is the prime object of a text. This is a use which the best class of texts always does secure. This, doubtless, is the radical idea which lies at the foundation of the usage.

(1) This use of a text outweighs much objection to the custom of preaching from texts. It answers abundantly Voltaire's objection. An inspired thought is

not likely to be the material of an attenuated discourse. If the sermon be diluted, the defect is not, probably, in the text. Voltaire did not fail to appreciate the value of a pithy saying of genius as a motto of discourse. Why may not inspiration claim at least as much respect as the utterances of genius? Very much of the reverence which is silently paid by the popular mind to the pulpit is probably due to the secret educating power of this custom of the pulpit.

Again : this use of a text answers Mr. Garrison's objection. If the Bible be an inspired volume, it is inspired for a purpose. If inspired for a purpose, it is divinely fitted to that purpose. If fitted to that purpose, it is a compend of the truths most necessary to the world in all time. Distinctions of past, present, and future do not destroy its pertinence as a whole. Much more inspired truth has been uttered to men than the Bible contains. The Bible is God's selection from the accumulated archives of inspiration. Its histories, its biographies, its liturgies, its psalmody, its doctrines, its precepts, its prophecies ; its pictures of character, divine, angelic, and human ; the secret life with God which it portrays ; and its disclosures of the eternal worlds, — all are selected fragments, put together for a purpose, like a mosaic. Such a book, framed for such a purpose, can never, as a whole, be antiquated. It can contain nothing, which, for the purposes of such a volume, can ever be obsolete. The world will always need it, and will need the whole of it. As a unit, it will be as fresh to the last man as to you and to me. This, then, is the strong point in the claim which the pulpit asserts to reverence for its usage in preaching from texts, — that they give divine authority to the sentiments of the pulpit. Yield this, and you revolutionize

the pulpit in less than one generation. The instincts of infidelity are very keen in scenting out and worrying down, if possible, a clerical usage like this, which is the most vital exponent the pulpit has of its own faith and of the popular faith in inspiration.

(2) Further, this use of a text as an inspired authority is of special value in the preaching of obnoxious doctrines. On the doctrine of future punishment, for example, it is not the argumentations of the pulpit which hold the popular mind to the truth most rigidly: it is the downright and inevitable authority of a few texts. He would be a very unwise man who should throw away his advantage in advancing to the discussion of such a doctrine under the cover of a divinely spoken word. It is more than the protection of a masked battery. This protective bearing of a text is specially assisted by the position of a text in the construction of a sermon. The text usually heads the discourse. It predisposes a reverent hearer to listen with a docile temper, if a preacher advances behind inspired leadership. Divine words first, the human teaching in the sequel: this order of thought tends to secure reverent assent.

(3) But does not this very subjection of the human to the divine, as has been suggested, hamper the freedom of the pulpit? Not at all. For we notice, further, that this use of a text encourages a regulated freedom in the pulpit. Some subjects, it is true, are not expressed in any scriptural text; but, if they are not expressed, they may be contained in a principle which is expressed. Some principles, it is true, are not affirmed in a declarative form; but they may be implied in a narrative, a parable, an act, a character which is recorded. Some subjects, it is true, are not logically contained in any such text; but they may be rhetori-

cally suggested by a text, and the text may be used by a manly accommodation to the theme. Here, we contend, is all the freedom that the pulpit needs, all that a preacher of a revealed religion has any right to desire. If a subject is not expressed in any scriptural passage, and is not contained in any scriptural principle, and is not implied in any scriptural narrative, parable, event, character, and is not, by any manly association of thought, suggested by any scriptural language, the preacher of a revealed system of truth will not waste much time in defending such a subject against the poverty of the Bible in not furnishing a text for it. It is a healthful corrective of idiosyncrasy in a preacher, that if he proposes, as an ancient pastor of the Hollis-street Church, Boston, once did, to preach on "The Morals and Manners of the Marquis de Rochefoucault," he should find himself driven out of the Bible, as the preacher was, and compelled to preach without a text.

(4) This view suggests, further, that this use of a text tends to put a preacher in his true relation to divine authority. The real character of a preacher as a minister of God, speaking for God, uttering God's words, unfolding God's thoughts, is silently kept before his own mind, and before that of his hearers. The tendency is to impart a most vitalizing spiritual influence to both, — to him, in giving; to them, in receiving. If secular orators had an inspired collection of secular themes of discourse, nothing but depravity would prevent their using it as the clergy use the Scriptures. Upon all the principles of high art in public speech, they would be dolts if they did not use it.

A curious phenomenon is observable here in secular eloquence; it is that it has, in fact, invented for itself expedients which are in some respects equivalent to the

texts of the pulpit. What is the object of indictments and other legal forms, the reading of which precedes forensic addresses? What is the object of resolutions and bills, the reading of which introduces legislative speeches? As related to secular oratory, they are designed to put the speaker at once in position with the business in hand and with his audience. When Daniel Webster rose to reply to Gen. Hayne in the United States Senate, he answered in a breath much of the harangue of his opponent, and put himself in position before his auditors, by saying, "Mr. President, I call for the reading of the resolution before the Senate." This was no more nor less than taking a text.

2d, Of the positive uses of texts, and the objects to be aimed at in their selection, the second is that of promoting popular intelligence in the perusal of the Scriptures. It is not a small benefit to a people to have a hundred passages of the Bible expounded every year from the pulpit with the aid of the latest scholarship in exegesis.

(1) Observe especially that this use of a text grows naturally out of the preaching of a revealed religion, and that the popular knowledge of such a religion will be proportioned to that of preachers in their use of texts. The popular mind obtains unconsciously its principles of interpretation from the usage of the pulpit. As the one is, so is the other. Clearness in the pulpit is good sense in the pew. Mysticism in the pulpit is nonsense in the pew. The absence of exposition from the pulpit is ignorance of the Bible in the pew. Like priest, like people. The Sabbath school, Bible classes, family instruction, under a vigorous ministry, will in the long run take character from the pulpit. The key which will wind up and keep in

movement the whole machinery of popular growth in a knowledge of the Scriptures is the handling of texts by a skillful preacher.

(2) Importance is added to this use of a text by the fact that the exposition of texts is the exposition of the choicest passages of the Bible. Well-chosen texts are the gems of scriptural thought. They represent fundamental doctrines, and vital principles, and essential duties, and central characters, and critical events, and thrilling scenes, and profound experiences. They are the dense points of revelation, at which light is most vivid. The Bible is dotted over with them. To see them is to see the whole firmament of truth in which they are set. They are constellations in a cloudless sky. An intelligent and scholarly explanation of a thousand texts might indoctrinate a people in the whole system of biblical truth.

3d, A third use of a text, and object in its selection, is to cherish in the minds of hearers an attachment to the language of the Bible. In the popular notion of religious truth, words very easily become things. Never is language more readily consolidated into a living thing around which the reverence of a people will grow, than when that language is long used to express their religious convictions, or their religious inheritance from their fathers. Therefore, if reverence be not cherished for the scriptural forms of truth, it will be for uninspired forms. The popular mind will have it for something. We are suffering to-day from a morbid attachment, in some sections of the Church, to uninspired standards of religious thought. A reverence is cherished for technicalities of theological science, and for certain forms of truth expressed in ritual and liturgic service, which nothing should receive but an

inspired production. It has been believed by more than one of the lovers of the Book of Common Prayer, that its authors and compilers were under the guidance of inspiration in their work. Views of divine superintendence have been advanced in behalf of the Westminster Confession, which involve a subordinate degree of the inspired gifts in the leaders of the Westminster Assembly. Similar ideas have been expressed concerning the works of John Wesley. A very intelligent Baptist clergyman once inquired of me if I did not believe that something very like apostolic inspiration was imparted to Robert Hall.

Why does a most excellent missionary society report its labors in a destitute section of Pennsylvania, as consisting of a distribution of Bibles and Testaments to the number of five hundred and thirty-nine, and of prayer-books three thousand two hundred and seventy? Why is it, that, in our own communion, that phraseology in theological controversy which is most hotly contested, and is deemed most sacred, because most essential to truth, in the view of the contending parties, is *not* scriptural phraseology?

This leads us to a further fact, which is that some truths can not be concisely presented to the popular mind otherwise so clearly as by the exact scriptural forms of them. The statements of the doctrine of the Trinity in many of our standards — are they not notorious failures? It has cost the pulpit infinitely more labor to explain and defend them than it would have done to explain and defend the Scriptures on that doctrine. Some such truths it will not do to define to the popular mind as we should to the scholastic mind. A definition which is metaphysically true may be practically false. The connection of the race with Adam,

and the character of infants it is unwise to attempt to define to the popular comprehension beyond the very limited notices taken of either subject in the Bible. We are almost certain of coming into conflict with the necessary beliefs of men, if we make the attempt, — a thing which the Scriptures never do. Let us have this instinct of popular reverence, then, in its legitimate uses. Let us so treat uninspired formularies as to subject them, in the habits of the popular feeling, to the inspired standards, no more, and no less, and no other.

This view meets the objection to the custom, drawn from its abuse by pedantic preachers. Sismondi may have been reasonably disgusted by the pedantry of the priesthood of his day; but a scholarly care for verbal exposition of an inspired book is not pedantry. An inspired production deserves a minuteness of exegesis of which no other production is worthy. The words of the Scriptures are to the popular mind like the words of a will by which an inheritance is conveyed. The presumption is that any and every word is important, and may be emphatic.

4th, A fourth use of a text is to facilitate a hearer's remembrance of the truths presented. The best texts are brief statements of truth. They are easily remembered. Moreover, the best texts contain a comprehensive view of the whole scope of the sermons founded upon them. The most felicitously chosen texts are the sermons in miniature. The sermons are in them like an oak in the acorn. To recall them is to recall the train of thought which the sermons develop. Further: inspired language, other things being equal, impresses the memory the more strongly for being inspired. It is authoritative language. Memory is assisted by reverence for authority. Inspired language is usually of un-

common raciness. The Bible is the most brilliant book in the world, in respect of style. It abounds in sententious utterances of truth. It is a book of axioms. Its imagery is fascinating. Its style pulsates with life. It has a wonderful power to fasten itself in the human memory. The first missionaries in the South Sea Islands found that their most ignorant converts to Christianity were attracted to the Scriptures often, when they seemed to get no pleasurable or even connected ideas from "Pilgrim's Progress" or from "Robinson Crusoe."