

LESSON XI.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

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LECTURE XI.

THE EXPLANATION : MATERIALS, QUALITIES.

7TH, Proceeding with the discussion of the materials of exposition, we find a seventh source of them in the facts of natural science.

(1) Sometimes natural science illuminates the commonly received interpretation of texts. Dr. Chalmers brought the whole system of modern astronomy under tribute to the text, "Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth." William Jay added to the clerical stock of thought by his use of the science of metallurgy to illustrate the text, "He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." John Pye Smith and others have brought the science of physiology to enforce the text, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." A volume has been written on the religion of chemistry, which can not but be auxiliary to the exposition of many biblical texts. The science of anatomy has often been made to assist interpretations of the narratives of our Lord's crucifixion. A certain physician now living has probably been saved from infidelity by observing the unconscious truthfulness of the evangelists, in their account of the crucifixion, to anatomical facts which then were entirely unknown to science. No doubt can exist of the propriety of employing the fruits of natural science in homiletic service, in cases

like these, in which science directly illustrates and intensifies the commonly received interpretations of the Scriptures.

(2) Occasion for solicitude arises, however, in the minds of many, lest natural science, in other cases, should make havoc with exegesis. A homiletic question arises, therefore, to this effect, "Ought a preacher to disturb the popular mind by the homiletic use of scientific discoveries which seem to conflict with biblical exegesis?" The following well-known facts appear entitled to the weight of conclusive argument in the affirmative.

The weight of scholarly authority among commentators now admits the principle that scientific discovery may modify within certain limits our interpretation of the Scriptures. It can not be questioned that modern philology has yielded somewhat to natural science. Commentators may differ in detail as to what and how much should be yielded; but the weight of authority, by a vast preponderance, agrees in yielding something. The principle is admitted, that ^{*}philology is not above admonition and instruction from other sciences. This fact should have great weight in guiding the ministrations of the pulpit. On questions of this nature the popular mind should be taught to follow the authority of Christian scholarship. We do incalculable injury if we encourage the people in a pious independence of learning in their interpretations of the Bible. It is unsafe for a preacher, even by silence, to allow a hiatus to grow between the popular faith and the results of learned investigation.

A second fact to be remembered is the one so often and so justly claimed by biblical philologists, — that science has never yet established facts inconsistent with

philology, def. the study of literature and of disciplines relevant to literature or to language

a natural interpretation of the Scriptures on philological principles. The truth of this position need not be argued now: it is too familiar to you. But its bearing on the policy of the pulpit for the future needs to be enforced. Two points, specially, we should claim as settled. One is that the controversy between science and exegesis has an accumulated history. Apparent collision between the two is no novelty. We should never treat it as a novelty in our own minds, nor allow an opponent to do so in discussing the claims of the Scriptures. Very much is lost with the people, if we lose a certain prestige to which the history of this controversy entitles us, by seeming ourselves to come to it, or permitting our opponents to do so, *de novo*, as if the conflict were one in which nothing had as yet been settled, and nothing, therefore, could at present be assumed. We should always start with the indisputable claim that the conflict has a history.

The other point is, that, setting aside the question of the inspiration of the Scriptures, a philosophical argument may be constructed in their defense, founded upon the history of this controversy. Candid philology has never yet been contradicted by candid science, and it is a philosophical inference that it never will be. Presumed contradictions in numerous instances have been disproved by the final conclusions of authorities on both sides. Philology has modified its interpretations. True; but science has modified its claims; some it has abandoned; others it has qualified. Natural science has shifted its ground more frequently and more rapidly than biblical philology has done. The result thus far is, that, with no disparagement to either, each has approached the other. On several great topics once in dispute there is no longer any

respectable debate between them. They see eye to eye. The point of the argument for exegesis is that sound philological principles have not been abandoned. Science has created no necessity for the surrender of them. They have only been defined more accurately. Exegesis understands itself better than ever before, and is all the stronger for its changes of base.

It follows that the pulpit need not be disturbed by the occurrence of new points of contact between natural science and exegesis. These will occur as old ones have occurred. The time may come when the most candid and the most reverent attitude of mind respecting them will be one of temporary suspense. As honest men we may be obliged sometimes to suggest probable interpretations rather than those of which we feel assured. Even possible conceptions of the inspired meaning may be temporarily given for the want of better. Be it so: temporary suspense of confident exegesis is no new thing: the Bible has survived many such periods. We should not be alarmed. Nor should we ever intimate to the people a doubt from which they might reasonably infer that our faith is disturbed. The pulpit should never tremble at the shaking of a spear. Faith ought not to waver at a phenomenon which has become almost periodical in the history of opinion. Timid utterances from the pulpit under such suspenses of interpretations are like the fright of savages at an eclipse. Wait. Teach the people to wait. Teach them intellectual patience. The history of such phenomena in the past is a pledge for the future. What if hereditary theories of inspiration have to undergo revision? This is no novelty. Inherited faith can scarcely suffer a ruder shock than it received and lived through when the Copernican astronomy first met the word of God.

The current theories of inspiration were revolutionized by that apparent collision. Yet how simple a thing that revolution seems to us now! How securely we smile at the popes who tried to throttle it! Why, then, should we fear to encounter similar revolutions in the future? Why, for instance, should we fear the Darwinian speculations, be their conclusions what they may? Is there not here a philosophical argument altogether independent of the divine authority of the Scriptures, and yet an argument so simple that it can often be made available for anchoring the faith of the people in the Bible? I can not but think that the pulpit itself frequently needs toning up to a more philosophic confidence in the destiny of the Scriptures.

(3) This leads me to observe that an educated clergy must bear some opprobrium caused by the reckless claims of an uneducated clergy. Ignorant and partly educated preachers do immense injury to the pulpit by their blind hostility to science. They assert claims in behalf of inspiration which can not possibly be sustained. Christian scholarship has no desire to sustain them. Christian ignorance insists on interpretations at which the intelligence of the world laughs, and over which the intelligence of the Church mourns. When zeal in opposing the science of infidels intemperately charges infidelity upon science, infidelity gets the best of the argument. A reaction to the discredit of clerical candor and clerical learning is inevitable. We must, therefore, take this into account in adjusting the policy of the pulpit. We should be more cautious to do justice to the facts of science, because we must bear the brunt of the conflict at a point where we are weakened by our own allies. Our strategy should be simply that of candor and courage. Not only admit all that

science can fairly claim, but admit it with the coolness of one who can afford to do it; admit it with the magnanimity of one who claims his enemy for a friend. As interpreters, we claim science as the tributary of the Bible. The hostility is only apparent, and that appearance is but temporary. We should act upon this conviction. We can afford to be generous; for all that we give will return to us again.

(4) A final fact, which you have doubtless anticipated me in uttering, is that the policy here recommended is the only one which can be permanently successful. The popular mind has a very brief and blunt logic, which it will inevitably oppose to a written revelation if it is once permitted to believe that the revelation can not bear the facts of the material world. In the long run, men will believe that they see what they see, and hear what they hear, let the book say what it may. Fire is fire: there are no two opinions about that. That is not a divine revelation which disputes the fact. The popular mind will feel not a moment's hesitation, if, by any blindness of the pulpit, infidelity can succeed in narrowing the conflict down to any such controversy as that. It is then no longer a conflict between faith and reason: it is a conflict between faith and the human senses: it is between faith in dead ages and the testimony of a man's own eyes. For permanent service, therefore, the only policy which is practicable to the pulpit is to hold science in its normal relations as the friend and ally of the Scriptures. Use it as a tributary; use it freely; use it trustfully; use it courageously.

IV. We pass now to the fourth topic in the discussion of the explanation; namely, its qualities.

1st. In the first place, an explanation should be such

as to give the true meaning of a text. Bearing in mind the preliminary remark already made, that we are considering the theory of explanations with reference, not to the explanatory fragment of a topical sermon alone, but to the whole subject of expository preaching as well, the rule now before us is evidently fundamental to a large proportion of evangelical preaching. We have, on a former occasion, considered the question of the use of interpolated texts and of mistranslated texts. A practical question distinct from that occurs in every preacher's experience. It is, "May we employ a popular or an inherited misinterpretation of a text for the sake of homiletic advantages attending such a use of it?" Such advantages doubtless exist. Effective sermons are preached on such misinterpretations. Souls have been saved by such sermons. Still the obvious reply to the inquiry must be in the negative; and this, on substantially the same principles as those applied to the use of interpolations and mistranslations.

(1) The meaning of the text *is* the text. The inspired thought constitutes the text. A misinterpreted text is no part of the Bible.

(2) Moreover, many popular misinterpretations are inferior in homiletic value to the true interpretations. Many texts are more pertinent and beautiful and suggestive for the direct uses of the pulpit in their true version than in their commonly received perversion. An example of this occurs in the popular interpretation of Col. ii. 8: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit." This is misinterpreted commonly, as teaching the danger of the corrupting influence of philosophy upon religious doctrine. Both the pulpit and theological schools are responsible for encouraging this erroneous interpretation. The pas-

sage contains no such warning. It teaches a far more necessary and impressive lesson. Strictly interpreted, and translated into modern speech, this text means no more nor less than this: "Be on your guard, that no man may captivate you by religious sophistry." This idea, for the purposes of the pulpit to say the least, is vastly superior to that which has been so often foisted into the passage, of the danger of philosophy in corrupting systems of theology. So it will be found to be in the large majority of instances. The true sense of a text exegetically expounded is its best sense for homiletic use.

(3) It should be further observed, that the past and present usage of the pulpit respecting truthfulness of interpretation is not entirely trustworthy. Explanations which exegesis has exploded are sometimes retained by the pulpit for their homiletic usefulness. Preachers often employ in the pulpit explanations of texts which they would not defend in an association of scholars. The pulpit suffers in its exegetical practice by retaining for polemic uses explanations which originated in an abuse of philosophy. I do not say in the use of philosophy. We have seen that there is a legitimate use of philosophy, within certain limits, in aiding the discoveries and application of sound philology. But philosophy has often tyrannized over philology. In the defense of the creeds of the Church, the exigencies of philosophy have overborne the philological instinct of the popular mind, as well as the philological learning of the schools. A modern exegete affirms that the interpretation of the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans which makes it a description of Christian experience was never heard of in the Church till the time of Augustine. He originated it to support

his theory of original sin. He held the opposite interpretation, as now held by many German exegetes, till he was pressed in the argument with Pelagius. The authority of Augustine, and the force of his theology, have sent down to our own day the interpretation he then adopted.

Again: the pulpit often suffers, in its exegetical practice, from an unthinking acceptance of certain popular traditions. Where no homiletic nor polemic uses of texts are in question, certain traditional ideas are blended with the popular reading of the Scriptures, which the pulpit often adopts without inquiry into their biblical authority. For example: the idea that Mary Magdalene was a harlot is generally assumed in homiletic explanations of her history. This is the popular idea. From this is derived a popular title for asylums for fallen women. But there is no evidence in the Scriptures that she was any thing worse than the victim of demoniacal possession. Yet the popular mind has assumed that the phrase "seven devils" (so often called "unclean spirits" in the Scriptures) means profligacy. Painters have seconded the assumption, and art has made it immortal. The pulpit has fallen in with it without much inquiry into the precise significance of the inspired narrative. Archbishop Whately says, that, when he once ventured to question the popular theory, the Scriptures were confidently referred to by his opponent as proof conclusive against him. But the only evidence was found to be the table of contents which formed the heading of the chapter in our English version.

Still further: the pulpit suffers, in its exegetical authority, from the habit of spiritualizing all parts of the Scriptures indiscriminately. Ancient usage justi

fied any use of a text, which, by any eccentric laws of association, could be made serviceable to any practical religious impression. Popular commentaries have largely contributed to this abuse. Some of them no preacher can read respectfully without insensibly surrendering somewhat of his integrity of exegetical taste.

Such are the more important of the reasons for the caution which I have advanced, that the past and present usage of the pulpit respecting truthfulness of interpretation is not entirely trustworthy. You can not safely accept that usage as authority. It is improving, but it is no model for a youthful ministry. Do not be misled by it. Form your own model, and let it be one which scholarship, and good taste, and good sense can approve.

(4) In further consideration of the question before us, let it be observed that a want of hermeneutic accuracy in the explanation of the Scriptures is hazardous to the authority of the pulpit. A preacher is in danger of great inconsistencies of interpretation who accepts any other ultimate guide in his expositions than that of hermeneutic science. "Ultimate guide," I say; for the legitimacy of the influence of philosophy and of natural science, as proximate guides, has been admitted. That is, they legitimately help to define and discover principles of biblical hermeneutics. But, when those principles are settled, their authority is final. A preacher puts in peril the power of his pulpit, if he fails to recognize this, and to act upon it. He will often make the Scriptures self-contradictory.

A more subtle danger is that of awakening the silent conviction in the minds of hearers that a preacher's interpretations are not trustworthy. Hearers are more shrewd than is often supposed in detecting a real weak-

ness in the pulpit. As strength makes itself felt, so does weakness, when hearers can not define either, or tell their sources. It matters little what it is, a weakness will be discovered. The common people may know little of the laws of interpretation, but they will discover the fact, if these laws are often violated by their religious teachers. First in the form of a suspicion, then in the form of an impression, and at length in the form of a conviction, the feeling will find its way among them, that, whatever else their pastor may be, he is not a safe interpreter of the Scriptures. He adds nothing to their knowledge of God's word. They do not feel assured of his accuracy in the use of biblical language. A commentary like Barnes's Notes appeals to their common sense more satisfactorily. It needs no argument to prove, that, if this is the silent impression which the pulpit makes upon a people, the prestige of that pulpit is in peril.

You will be struck with the fact, when you become familiar with the ministry, that there are two classes of men in the profession: there are the men who sustain the pulpit, and the men whom the pulpit sustains. There are preachers whom the profession carries. They are so much dead weight. They add nothing to its power of movement. They do nothing which a layman might not do as well. As laymen themselves, they would be as useful as they are, except for this fact, — that they gain something from the glamour of professional connections. Such men are the first to be overwhelmed by the rising tide of biblical thought and biblical enthusiasm which they do not understand, and of which they can make no use. Infidelity starts inquiries, and Christian thought seconds them, which such men can not answer. They can only plod on in

what they call more practical ways, and in time the Church drops them. Yet a moderate amount of biblical learning, kept constantly fresh by biblical study, would save such men.

(5) This view is further enforced by the fact that biblical science is advancing more rapidly than any other with which the pulpit has directly to do. No other has received such a solid, enduring impulse as this has during the last fifty years. It has far more palpable results of progress to show than speculative theology. One cause and one consequence of this is the constant appearance of new commentaries and other works expository of the Scriptures. No other department of sacred learning is now multiplying books so rapidly as this. The literature of it changes with every decade of years. Few other books of solid worth are so soon displaced by later authorities as books of comment on the Bible. In no other department does a pastor's library need such frequent weeding and replenishing as in this.

This rapidity of growth in biblical science is vital to the tastes and habits of a preacher. Is it not easy to see how fatally a pastor may be left in the rear of biblical scholarship? It will never do to plod on in old ways of exegesis, content with the ancient interpretations of texts, yet hoping to be sustained as religious authorities with the people, merely because we build useful sermons on such interpretations. You might as sensibly teach in colleges the Ptolemaic system of astronomy. A preacher, then, has a very significant part of his life's work before him in qualifying himself to explain truthfully the meaning of his texts.