

LESSON XV.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

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*** Note:** Bro. Phelps was of the group that believe that the Lord's Day, Sunday, was to be considered the Sabbath. This, of course, is an error; albeit a common one even today. The Sabbath is and always has been Saturday and was given only to the Jews. When bro. Phelps refers to the "Sabbath-school" he is referring to what we would call Sunday School. And when he refers to "the Sabbath" he is referring to Sunday, which is also referred to as the Lord's Day.

**** Define "excursus."**

LECTURE XV.

EXCURSUS: THE BIBLE SERVICE.

THIS discussion of the subject of exposition suggests another topic, which does not necessarily belong to it as a subject of homiletic theory, but which excites considerable interest at present, and is naturally considered now in the form of an *excursus*.** The question is specifically this, Does the biblical instruction of our churches require any change in the present usages of the New England pulpit in conducting the services of the Lord's Day?

I. To answer this question intelligently, we need to note, first, some facts respecting the state of things in which our present usages had their origin. One is, that, in the olden time, the two sermons on the Lord's Day, with the accompanying exercises, constituted the whole of the services of public worship.* Sabbath-schools were not. The first Sabbath-school in this country is not yet seventy-five years old. Bible-classes were not common. I am not able to find evidence that they existed, to any general extent, before Sabbath-schools were instituted. Weekly lectures were not frequent, except the single lecture preparatory to the administration of the Lord's Supper. We are within bounds in saying, that, as a general rule, the services of public worship were limited to the Lord's Day and to the two preaching services of that day.

Although dated and localized to New England in the late 1800's, this section has many basic and usable ideas and also addresses some of the problems which still exist today. Therefore, this section has been left in the study.

Another fact bearing upon the question is that biblical exposition was not common, except in the exercises of public worship. Nearly all the exposition of the Scriptures which the people received was from their pastors, and was given by them from their pulpits. The formal, religious instruction of children at home was confined mainly to two things, — the Westminster Catechism and the text of the Scriptures, both of which were committed to memory. Aged persons are still living who give evidence of this fact in their own religious culture.

The second Sabbath-school in Massachusetts was established by my father, at the suggestion of a Christian lady, in his parish at West Brookfield. It was done in opposition to the judgment of some of his most devout parishioners. They refused to countenance the innovation by the presence of their children. And he has told me that he and others who favored it had reflected so little on the subject, that they scarcely knew what to do with the children who did attend. At the first they could think of nothing appropriate to the Lord's Day, but the committal to memory of biblical passages, the Catechism, and Watts's Psalms and Hymns.

That state of things could not well have been different; for there were no popular commentaries. Christian parents had not the means of interpreting the Scriptures to their households without aid from the pulpit. "Doddridge's Family Expositor," published about a hundred and thirty years ago, was the first work of the kind in our language, and was not of great value for the discussion of the difficulties of the Bible; nor was the circulation of it at all general. Books were costly, and the country poor. The best biblical commentaries were in Latin, and of course accessible only

to the clergy. Rev. Albert Barnes once told me, that, when he began the preparation of his "Notes on the New Testament," the only books he could depend upon for his assistance were his lexicons, and a copy of the "Critici Sacri,"—a work in thirteen Latin folios, which formed the best part of his library. Yet that was not far from the year 1830. I give these details in evidence of the fact, that, from the necessity of the case, biblical exposition through all the early periods of New England history must have come from the clergy, and must have been a part of the work of the pulpit on the Sabbath.

It is in evidence, furthermore, that the exposition of the Scriptures in the early history of our churches was not neglected by the pulpit. The biblical learning of the clergy was, of course, variable. But among them were at all times to be found excellent Greek and Hebrew scholars. The proportion of those who had a working knowledge of the Hebrew language was at one time probably larger than at present. Many of the old manuscript sermons still found in the archives of our libraries are replete with exposition. So far as I am able to learn, the bulk of the ancient preaching of New England was not of a controversial or a dogmatic character. The majority of those discourses were practical discussions of Christian experience, hortatory appeals to the impenitent, sermons of biblical biography and incident, and expositions and textual discussions.

Another fact points in the same direction. The usage was almost universal of commenting on the passage of the Scriptures which was read as a preliminary to the "long prayer." Many of the early churches of New England would not tolerate the reading of the Bible in their pulpits without such comment. The

rehearsal of the Scriptures as the "lesson of the day," as practiced in the Church of England, and which has now become so common among us, our fathers resolutely discouraged and often denounced. They called it "dumb reading." As they would not "say prayers," but would pray, so they would not read the Scriptures after a manner which tempted them to indolent and listless worship. Whatever else they did, they would not mock God. That state of feeling led to a vast amount of exposition of the Bible outside of sermons.

II. It is very obvious that time has brought about a silent revolution in the relations of our pulpit to the work of explaining the word of God. The ancient usage of the two sermons on the Lord's Day remains, for the most part, without innovation; but that is nearly all that remains unchanged.

Specially should it be noted that biblical instruction has come to be very largely given by laymen. It has become a question for debate in Sabbath-school conventions, what duty and what privilege, if any, belong to the clergy in the working of the whole machinery of biblical teaching to the youth of their parishes. The practical connection of the pastor with the school is in the majority of cases nominal. Again: popular commentaries have greatly diminished the dependence of adult hearers upon the pulpit for their scriptural knowledge. It has become a much more laborious effort than it once was to preach expository discourses which will find listening ears. Exposition, if not more learned, must be more versatile and more spirited.

As a natural consequence of this state of things, exposition in our pulpits has suffered a very general and exhaustive decline. Coleridge pronounced it one of the silent revolutions by which learning had suffered

in England, that literature had to so large an extent "fallen off from the liberal professions." By a similar revolution, scriptural exposition has silently fallen off from the pulpit. Comparatively few expository sermons are preached. In some congregations they would subject a preacher's zeal to adverse criticism. Even textual sermons are not nearly so abundant as they were a century ago. The habit of comment on the passages of the Bible read for devotional uses has almost entirely ceased. Popular taste and clerical compliance have sacrificed this ancient and invaluable usage to the demand for brevity in public worship.

Meanwhile, what of the ancient double service of the pulpit on the Sabbath? It surely is not holding our audiences with sufficient force to prevent their questioning its usefulness. One of the modern "signs," as you very well know, indicative of the relations subsisting between the pulpit and the pew, is the query whether one service for preaching purposes is not better than two. However the question may be answered, it is a very pregnant matter to the pulpit that the question should ever have been asked. It indicates a flagging of Christian interest in the work of the pulpit as now conducted. Why is not the query raised, whether some other labor of the day is a necessity? Why do not thoughtful laymen ask whether the Sabbath-school should be suspended, or the evening conference meeting?

The people are sensible of monotony in the two sermons of the day, as they are not in attendance upon any other services of a crowded Sunday. By parting with expository preaching, the pulpit has parted with its most important aid and stimulus to variety. No other one thing gives to preaching so wide a range of

religious thought as the exposition of the Scriptures, when it comes forth as the fruit of a rich, full mind,—rich in scholarly resources, and full of intense practical aims.

This, in my view, explains why thinking and overtasked laymen are asking how the Lord's Day can be made less laborious. The two sermons, with their devotional accompaniments, are the only two things in the occupations of the day in which, as now generally conducted, the sense of monotony is unavoidable. The second sermon is often a treadmill in its impression of sameness. There is no evidence that the popular interest in preaching *as such* has declined. The largest regular audiences in the land are in churches. No such audiences could be assembled weekly anywhere else. But Sabbath engagements have multiplied, and other *stimuli* to religious thought have crowded within the popular reach, so that, to sustain the preaching at its established height of interest, a new inspiration of variety is indispensable. Under the circumstances, it is the most natural thing that church-going people should seek relief from overtasking by proposing to drop one of the only two services which appear to them to be substantially alike. We can not blame them for not being reverently fond of treadmills.

III. We may then safely answer the main question, so far at least as to say, that, in some form or other, we need to reinstate the biblical instruction of our churches and our youth in the pulpit, and in the hands of pastors. This, it seems to me, is the vital point to be carried. The fatal evil is that preaching should be isolated from the work of scriptural teaching. No preacher can afford to allow that work to fall off from his pulpit. An orator in the pulpit is a great man; but

no man is so great that he can afford to be nothing else than a pulpit orator. The evil thrusts with two edges. It cuts down the worth of the preaching, and it cuts down the worth of teaching as well.

On this last point, both pastors and laymen often need to be wiser than they are. Nothing in the Christian training of a people works as well as it might work, if it is not headed by the pulpit. Men talk more glibly than wisely of the superiority of laymen and of women in Christian work. The notion that on any large scale, and for long periods of time, we can put religious work under the leadership of either men or women who are doing any thing else than religious work is not philosophical. Nothing else of the kind in this world prospers under leadership which is not concentrated upon it, and concentrated in the hands of men. Yet the man who devotes his life to the far-reaching study and conduct of Christian labor becomes *de facto* a clergyman. Call him what you will, dress him as you please, put him where you choose, he is practically a minister of the gospel. Licensed or unlicensed, "in orders," or without orders, or in disorder, he is, to the people among whom he works, a man set apart from themselves. He is not doing their work, nor living their life. He is not "one of them" in any vital sense of the phrase. He is a professional worker for Christ as truly as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

We must not be misled by names in a matter of this sort; and let us not succumb to a senseless prejudice against a clerical exterior. Of some things, we must have the form, if we have the thing. If the leadership of Christian work creates for itself the equivalent of ministers, the fact only indicates that the leadership naturally belongs to ministers, as theoretically we

should suppose it would belong to them. If we do not create the men *for* the work, they will be created *by* the work. The work suffers, if it is deprived of such leadership. Decapitate the clergy to-day, and Christian work has only to give itself for a generation to creating another set of men to take their places. This principle, then, it is reasonable to apply to the work of biblical instruction. We must believe that you can not have that form of Christian labor in its best development, if usages are so framed as to exclude the ministry from the doing of it. They must lead it by actual participation in it, or it must degenerate in quality, whatever it may be in quantity.

If these views are correct, it follows that one of the most vital changes which our present system of Christian work needs is to reinstate in the pulpit the work of biblical teaching; not at all to diminish that work elsewhere; not at all to hamper its freedom anywhere; but to restore the leadership in it to the pulpit. I say "restore," because the pulpit once had that leadership; for it had the whole of the work. It did all that was done. It is no innovation to devise methods of setting the pulpit again at the head of all expedients, and of all training for the scriptural education of the people. It is strictly a restoration of a prerogative which has become partially, and in many cases wholly, obsolete. It is a restoration which I believe nine-tenths, if not even a larger proportion, of our thinking laymen would gladly welcome.

Depend upon it that you have a just and a generous constituency to deal with in this thing. In no development of working power in real life are the true *aristoi* sooner found out and appreciated and obeyed than in our complicated system of labor for the religious cul

ture of the people. Workers of every grade find their honest level here by a gravitation more unerring than that of a plumb-line. The planets are not truer to their orbits. If, among any people of average intelligence and good sense and piety, you do not find your place of *moral* supremacy, where you shine as the stars, it will be because you lack something which belongs to the luster of that supremacy. There is a vacuum or a soft spot in you somewhere. Scholarship, tact, industry, innate force, or the graces of the divine in-dwelling, something or other, which, by the nature of things, lies in the ground-work of success, is always wanting when a biblical preacher fails to grasp and to hold the moral leadership of all the agencies at work among an honest and sensible people for their Christian building and adornment.

IV. But how shall this re-instatement of biblical teaching in our pulpits be achieved? I answer, in view of what has been said, that some modification seems to be demanded in one of the two preaching services of the Sabbath as now sustained in our churches. Reconstruct one of these two services in such a way as shall bring the pulpit more obviously to the front in the work of biblical instruction. The question of expediency as affected by locality, by the public opinion of a church, by the character of a community, must, of course, be decided by the good sense of a pastor in each case as it arises.

The substitution of the Sabbath-school for the usual service of the afternoon is often, but by no means always, the best thing that is practicable. Yet this should never be done, unless it can be so arranged as to make the pastor active in the biblical work of the school. Whether he should be superintendent, or not,

is a minor matter. But the duties of the hour should be so planned as to give the pastor an opportunity, and lay upon him the necessity, of engaging personally and prominently in the scriptural teaching.

Then he should bring to that service the results of the best and latest biblical scholarship at his command. He must have not so much the headship of position as the headship of work. No pastor can afford an idle Sabbath half-day as the rule of his ministry. Never make the Sunday-school, therefore, a labor-saving expedient for your pulpit. Change only the form and method of your labor. Prepare for it with scholarly fidelity as laboriously as for a written sermon. Seek to elevate and expand by the change the biblical culture of your people. If you can not do that, by all means let the present usage remain intact. Any change which only gives to you a silent afternoon thrusts you into the rear of the Christian workers of your parish. It drapes your pulpit in token of bereavement of its most sacred prerogative. But in some cases the substitution of the Sunday-school for the preaching service of the afternoon, under the guidance of a studious and quick-witted pastor, is working with unquestioned success. Pastor and people alike are rejuvenated by it.

In other cases the "Bible service," technically so called, can be substituted profitably for the usual sermon of the afternoon. If a pastor has the qualifications requisite for such a service, and if the people are convinced of its value, so that they co-operate heartily in sustaining it, it is valuable far beyond the present second sermon. The social pliability of it, the freedom of question and answer, the directness with which it may bring to expression the questionings which are alive in the hearts of the people, render it in some cases the

most spiritual service of the day. Theoretically, at least, it looks very promising. It must be tested by time.

But there are diversities of gifts. Not every pastor can engineer well a Sabbath-school. Not every pastor can conduct a Bible service in a large assembly with Socratic wisdom. There are diversities also of parochial caliber and culture. Not every parish is superlatively wise. Not every parish is open to the innovations of a youthful pastor. Not every parish is co-operative with any pastor in infusing life into a public service. Very well: do not try to force your own nature or the inclinations of your people to distasteful experiments. Bend, rather, to your purpose the system now in vogue. Work into it an increase of expository and textual preaching. Seldom, if ever, preach two topical discussions in one day. Make one, at least, of your two discourses a distinctively and specially biblical one in material and form. Lay yourself out to swell the fund of biblical knowledge among your people. This is practicable to any pastor who will create the resources necessary for it in the culture of his own mind. It requires more than biblical learning. It requires a mental assimilation to the biblical atmosphere of thought. It requires a quick eye, a ready memory, and a nimble tongue. No man can succeed in it who does not love study, or who gives to biblical study the second place in the habits of his life, or who has not patience to train himself to fluent and versatile extemporaneous speech. But any man can make it a success who will give to it the same amount of enthusiasm and of toil which achieves success in other methods of preaching.

At the first there is no saving of labor; but when time has developed a preacher's skill in the selection

and working of biblical materials, and his command of extemporaneous utterance, there is a vast saving of labor, because of the accumulation of *available* materials. I mean a saving of labor relatively to the results achieved. It would be more accurate to say a more productive economy of labor. No other study is so prolific of the finest quality and variety of homiletic materials as the study of the Scriptures. No other materials work into the realities of human life and the emergencies of men's souls so deftly as the materials thus gained. Once full of them, and with a mind assimilated to their quality, with a speech which holds them at the tongue's end, a preacher need never exhaust himself. He need never rack his brain, or roam the streets, for something to say, and something to the point. The stream is perennial. It is the river of the water of life.

I do not speak on this subject without knowing whereof I affirm. You will pardon me if I give you — what you will bear me witness I do not often give in a formal way — a leaf from my own experience. I am not ashamed to say that I spent the larger part of the first night after my ordination in vigils of hopeless despair of ever being able to rise to the level of my pulpit. My sermons were — what they were. I knew it, if nobody else did. The first gleam of confidence that I gained arose from the kindness with which my very indulgent people received my expository remarks in conference meetings, for which I prepared myself as regularly as for the services of the Sabbath.

Led, as I believe, by the Spirit of God, I took up the Prophecy of Isaiah and the Epistle to the Romans as subjects of thorough study. I devoted to them from one to two hours daily, using the best helps at my

command. The first money I earned for my library was spent for books of sacred literature. Wisely or unwisely I made much of Monday mornings in building the biblical foundations of my ministry. The first tangible result was that I very soon found the materials of sermons thronging upon me from those two books of the Bible. I found unique texts for textual sermons, compact and prolific paragraphs for expository sermons, philosophical combinations of inspired thought which nothing else would have suggested to me, novel relations of Scripture to Scripture, discoveries of the secret harmonies of revelation, adjustments of truth to popular wants which I could have met in no other way, illustrations from books of Eastern travel, and, more than all else, an uplifting of my own mind into a biblical atmosphere, specially an atmosphere of faith in God and in this world's future. Then followed a repose of conscience in my labor which was entirely new to me.

Before four months had passed away I began to use the results of my scriptural studies in my pulpit. On every Sabbath afternoon, if I preached twice to my own people, I delivered extemporaneously, though from a full brief, a textual or an expository sermon on a passage selected from one of those two books which were the subjects of my daily research. The sermon was prepared always on Saturday; but the texts and materials were ready to my hand weeks in advance. After the first four months of my ministry I never spent a quarter of an hour hunting for a text or a theme. That course of biblical sermons, with a parallel course of doctrinal discussions, constituted the staple of my preaching; and at the end of my pastorate of six years I had not exhausted those two books of the Scriptures,

and had traversed less than one-third of a system of doctrinal theology.

My success was not brilliant, but I am confident that my biblical course saved my pulpit. Those scriptural sermons brought me near to the best Christian experience of my most godly hearers. They diversified and simplified my preaching, and expanded and deepened my range of thought in all the labors of my pulpit. They assisted me greatly in extemporaneous prayer. Inferior as those discourses seem to me now, and though I have no idea that they did as much good to any one else as to the preacher, yet I am sure that nothing else of which I was master could have held for me the confidence of my people in my ability to be their spiritual teacher. The work of those years is yet to be tried as by fire; but, if any thing in it shall bear the test by that purest of the elements, it will be found in that part of the work in which I went before my hearers with the most elaborate and yet the simplest results of my study of the word of God.

I speak the less unwillingly to you of that chapter of my life, because there was nothing in my experiment which was the fruit of genius, or in any way exceptional. In kind it was a success which any one of you may achieve, I hope in much greater degree. I beg you to try the experiment for yourselves. Supply your libraries at the outset with the best works in biblical literature. Do not spare your purses in so doing. Wear the old coat, and buy the new book. Incur any hazard or hardship, but those of debt or dishonor, to get your outfit of tools to work with. You must have them early in your ministry, if you are ever to use them. Your wedding can wait, but your library can not. Then systematize your biblical studies, and give your-

self to them religiously. Let the garden go unweeded, and let the potatoes rot in the ground. Get rid of church councils, and building committees, and executive miscellanies, so far as you honorably can. Leave the social dinners, and the pleasure-parties, and the regattas, and the operas, and the fast horses, to those who need them. Say you, with Nehemiah, to the messengers who tempt you to such things, "I am doing a great work, so that I can not come down: why should the work cease whilst I leave it and come down to you?" Cultivate a stern unity of purpose in your calling of God, and hold to it to the death. Come thus to your biblical sermons with a full mind which aches to deliver itself. Get yourself into a *state* of biblical production in which your materials for the pulpit shall always crowd *you*, you never hunting *them*.

Keep your pulpit thus in advance of your people in reverent knowledge of the word of God, and you may rest assured that the question of the double service on the Sabbath will settle itself, so far as your power to provide for it is concerned. You will at the same time have the leadership of your people in biblical instruction, without asking for it. The pulpit has only to take its own place, and sustain itself ably there, to have its biblical leadership acknowledged as its *natural* right. The growth of such a ministry in *spiritual* power is like the "path of the just."