

LESSON XXXIV.

LECTURE XXXIV.

THE CONCLUSION: CAUSES OF WEAKNESS.

THE last lecture closed with the mention of the inquiry, "Have not some preachers been successful in the pulpit, who have held all, or some, of certain theological distortions previously enumerated?"

I answer, in the first place, that it is very seldom that all the dogmas in question find a lodgment in one mind. Generally there is a break in the scheme of doctrine somewhere, where light streams in from a different system, and illumines the whole.

In the second place, these doctrines, when partially held, are rarely preached consistently to a popular audience. You hear them in university pulpits, but not often, in their completeness, in pulpits erected for the religious training of an ordinary church. We have read history to little purpose, if we look very confidently for theoretic consistency anywhere in a great work of real life. The wisest of men falsify impracticable theories when the brunt of practical life is to be encountered. Things which are pets in the study are apt to stay there when church-bells call to the house of God. It is characteristic of a very able man always, that he flings consistency to the winds, if he feels it to be blocking the wheels of success in a practical emergency. Bishop Berkeley was as wary as other citizens

of Newport in keeping himself on the safe side of a precipice, though he did not believe in the existence of precipices.

In the third place, the best of men falsify impracticable theories, under the impulse of godly emotions. It is characteristic of a very holy man, that he becomes as a little child in his faith in truth, when the fervor of a preacher's mission is upon him. He is then no longer the philosopher, the schoolman, the wise man, but the simple inquirer after God's bidding, and then he is apt to welcome that as other good men do, who have no philosophy but that of common sense. The spirit of a godly pulpit is like the spirit of prophecy, when the divine *afflatus* takes possession of it. Its language is, "Must I not take heed to speak that which the Lord hath put into my mouth?"

→ Hence it is that the large majority of preachers who hold theoretically dogmas which are unfriendly to applicatory power in the pulpit, either do not preach those dogmas, or, if they do, they ignore them when the point of application comes in the sermon which contains them. The two ends of a sermon are often charming contrasts to the eye of a logician. The Rev. James Alexander, D.D., believed the doctrine of limited Atonement; but I have been told by one who knew his habit in the pulpit, that nobody would have suspected it from his preaching. Luther believed in the servitude of the human will, and he left no room for doubt that he believed it; yet how sublime was his unconscious contradiction of it whenever he appealed to men to repent! William Jay was another of the sublime theologians. He said he thought that Calvinism, alluding to the necessitarian type of it, was a system to be held, but not a system to be preached. John Newton said it was

Ed. Note: This segment contains pro-Calvinistic sentiments which are left in for continuity. Please ignore the unbiblical Calvinistic sentiments and statements and accept the section only for its teachings on homiletic precepts. Calvinism is an unscriptural doctrine opposed to plain biblical understanding. (See our prerequisite courses on Salvation, Eternal Security, and others.) It is hard to tell if bro. Phelps agreed or not with Calvinism. He may only be reporting on it in the examples.

the worst system conceivable, if preached theoretically, but the best conceivable, if preached practically; that is, by expunging from it its fatalism.

All these godly men in their reservations and contradictions meant one thing. They meant that whatever their speculative theology contained which contradicted the necessary beliefs of men, and therefore hampered their own souls in appealing to the common sense and conscience of their hearers, should be flung aside when the business of the hour was to persuade men to be saved. Save men they must and would by all means at their command. Their theology must take care of itself.

On the same principle of theoretic inconsistency the fatalistic interpretations of Calvinism are generally held aloof, by those who believe them, from their applications of the gospel to their hearers. That is to say, they make those applications unconditionally. They do not remind men of their arbitrary destiny in the act of urging them to repent. They do not say to men, "Repent if you can; repent when you can; repent when God gives you the chance to repent." Who ever heard that in a Christian pulpit? Who ever heard it from any school of theology in a revival of religion? No: such preachers preach as other good men do. They say, "Repent, believe, obey, turn ye: why will ye die?" Under the impulse of their godly emotions they say these things just as if men could repent. Their hearers understand them as if they meant it. For the time they do mean it. Their necessitarian theories vanish while the practical business of the pulpit is in the foreground. Then the Spirit of God takes them at their word, and uses, not their philosophy, but the gospel, to the salvation of souls. This is the simple

history of a thousand necessitarian pulpits. Conscience, moved by the Spirit of God, if momentarily left to itself by the necessitarian tyranny, is quick to spring to its supremacy. It will then often lead men in triumph to their liberty and to the proof, in the very face of the slumbering philosophy, that they can repent by the act of repenting. A certain Scotch preacher, who held the theology of John Knox without abatement, had for years been accustomed to append to his exhortations to repentance the proviso that the Holy Spirit should impart the power to repent. At length, one day, his apostolic emotions so over-mastered him, that he forgot the wonted proviso, and let the exhortation stand by itself. At the close of the day a poor woman whom his philosophy had kept in bondage for years, so the story reads, came to him weeping tears of penitence and joy, and said to him, "Why didna ye ever tell me afore that I *could* believe?"

The majority of fatalistic preachers of our own day do tell sinners virtually that they can believe by the freeness with which, in the applications of their sermons, they exhort them to believe. It makes a vast difference to an awakened soul, if, at a certain juncture of its destiny, it is *not* reminded of its philosophic impotence. Silence on that point carries decisive implications. The Holy Spirit is quick and condescending to use the conclusions of many sermons, not pausing to settle their consistency with the beginnings. The practical hortation, with its invincible implications of human freedom, has behind it the whole force of the conscience and of the common sense of men. That buttress the necessitarian theology never has. Is it not quite intelligible, therefore, that many necessitarian preachers should have success in saving souls? Com-

fact together the apostolic fervor of the preacher, and the oratorical tact which that creates, and the unconscious magnetism of the man, and the truth of God which he utters at God's bidding, and the supremacy of conscience in the hearer, and the auxiliary force of his common sense, all wielded by the Holy Ghost, impelling the sinner's will one way, and what chance, speaking as the world speaks, has the fatalism preached a half-hour ago against the present omnipotence of such an alliance of moral forces?

But it may be imagined, that, if these theologic errors are so easily counteracted by the happy inconsistencies of preachers, they are of little or no moment in the pulpit. Why make an ado over them? This leads me to remark, in the fourth place, that a theoretic contradiction in the theology of the pulpit can never be wholly neutralized in its practical influence. Depravity is quick-witted. It is a sharp detective. It never ignores the inconsistencies of the pulpit. In times of religious awakening it is assisted by spiritual tempters, who, in all heathen history, have employed nothing else so destructively to the souls of men as fatalism. Numerically the large majority of mankind probably are held in bondage to-day by that one form of theologic error. That is an appalling conquest which the powers of evil make when they succeed in enthroning that error in a Christian pulpit under Christian forms. It is inconceivable that such a pulpit should be as effective for good in its appeals to men as it would be in whole-souled applications of the truth, in which the head and the heart of the preacher should move in harmony. Here, as elsewhere in oratorical speech, unity of spirit is essential to the ideal success.

Moreover, in the fifth place, it is not true that all

fatalistic theologians in the pulpit do save their usefulness by 'happy inconsistencies.' Some minds are too unelastic in their intellectual make to admit of a practical rebound from the logic of their theories. Of this class was the mind of John Foster. He clung to his theory of the constitutional guilt and the irresponsible helplessness, yet the fatal doom, of mankind, till it had tinged with gloom all his views of this life, and driven him in desperation to an equivalent of the doctrine of universal salvation. He could find no other refuge for his faith in the benevolence of God. It is impossible that so rare a thinker would not have been a more successful preacher if he had held a theory of depravity which should have made preaching a rational business.

The Rev. Dr. John M. Mason, a celebrated preacher in the city of New York in the early part of this century, and the model of pulpit eloquence to a multitude of his admirers, held consistently his theory of limited Atonement and imputed guilt and arbitrary election and reprobation; and the consequence was that a revival of religion was an occasion of sorrow to him, because he was unable to adjust his preaching to its obvious demands. He confessed to Professor Stuart, in the midst of a revival at New Haven, that he dared not preach to impenitent men as New England preachers of the school to which Professor Stuart belonged were then accustomed to preach. He could not offer salvation to unregenerate men as if it were designed for them, and as if he expected them to accept it by repentance and faith; for he did not believe they were capable of either. Such preachers represent a class of logically consistent thinkers and honest men, who must preach as they believe, and who, on some themes, believe that which forbids them to preach the truths which an awakened

conscience craves. A fearful burden is that under which an honest man sinks in the pulpit, when he can not offer a free salvation to the souls of his hearers without conscious perjury to his own.

But there remains to be noticed, in the sixth place, a class of preachers, meager in number it is to be hoped, whose fatalistic theology is held and preached consistently and heartlessly. Serene and contented believers are they of their favorite dogmas, unmitigated by the inconsistencies either of great genius or of godly emotions; and they themselves are unconscious of any burden in their inability to preach so as to win men to Christ. Their homiletic power is exhausted in parading with hideous consistency a theology, which, set in the frame-work which such minds create for it, is worthy of a Turk.

I do not speak with such severity, without an example in mind which you will denounce with equal indignation. A preacher in one of the fossilized towns on the Hudson River once preached a discourse on the duty of repentance, which, after a discussion in brazen consistency with its application, he ended substantially in this wise, as reported to me by one of his hearers: "My impenitent friends, if I did not know that the time and the seasons are in God's hand, I should even exhort you to the immediate performance of this momentous duty. But 'it is not of him that will-eth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that show-eth mercy . . . He hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.' I therefore pray you to watch for the Lord's time, and, if you ever receive his gracious calling, obey it and be saved: which may God in his mercy grant!"

Is this the preaching of the gospel? Is it the preach-

ing of any thing that is worthy of a sane man, or of a benevolent God? Could not one preach as rationally to a herd of buffaloes? I am glad to be able to say that I never heard such a sermon. Probably you never did. The men in the pulpit who can preach thus are cheerfully few: but that there was ever one such is evidence that probably there have been others; for it is the only consistent hortation which can follow certain theologic opinions which have been extensively held. Many have maintained their consistency by silence, so far as unregenerate hearers are concerned. Many preachers have preached only to converted hearers, and to them have preached so as to gain the reputation, and justly, of able and godly men.

Making all the deductions, then, which the facts of history will warrant, a charitable judgment leaves the pulpit beset by the causes which have now been named, operating with variable force to invalidate the applicatory power of preaching. The literature of the pulpit, published and unpublished, gives evidence that these malarial influences infect the atmosphere of ministries otherwise able and commanding: they indicate certain perpetual dangers to which the best of preachers are exposed, and against which they need perpetually to guard themselves. Men who are useful in spite of them are not as useful as they might be: they carry dead-weights in the race: they are shorn of strength which is their natural birthright.

III. The power of such causes as we have been considering to impair the practical force of the pulpit is more clearly seen in the contrast with the fact which I proceed now to notice as the third general topic in the treatment of conclusions. It is the intensity given to the applicatory uses of truth by the evangelical theory of preaching.

The facts and principles most essential to the development of this truth you will readily anticipate. I name them with brief remark. They are facts and principles which the evangelical theory of preaching always assumes in practice, whatever it may be in the abstract. Godly preachers of all schools in theology, who are intent on the saving of souls, always act on the assumption of these truths, whether consistently or not. They are the following.

1st, The extreme emergency in which the gospel finds men. Evangelical preaching addresses men as lost beings. It is speech in the most formidable of emergencies. The emergency is real: the peril is imminent. The most tragic of catastrophes is in the prospect, is actually occurring all the while in those invisible processes by which moral natures are indurated in sin, and from which they pass on to a hopeless eternity. There is no softening of it in the primary conception of what men are, and what their moral prospects are, as the gospel finds them. This is the initial idea held by an evangelical pulpit. We believe this: we come to our work with this idea uppermost in our thoughts of what we have to do. A continent heaving in the throes of an earthquake is not more exigent in its pressure on the sensibilities and the working energies of men than the condition of this world is as it lies mapped out before the mind of a Christian preacher.

2d, The second fact is the sufficiency of the provisions of the gospel to save men. This is as real as the necessity of salvation in the evangelical theory. The one is the counterpart of the other in intensity of meaning. The provisions are ample to meet the emergency. This world is a wreck surrounded with life-boats. It is a lost battle-field, with reserves at hand which are

ample to reverse the fortunes of the day. It is a world on fire, with the windows of heaven opening over the conflagration. This, too, we believe. We come to our work with the conviction that the loss of a soul is never a necessary catastrophe. We can not express our work more significantly than when we call it the business of saving souls. Not retribution, but eternal life, is the chief burden of our message.

3d, The third fact is, therefore, that, in the evangelical theory, this work of saving souls is a practicable business. We do not concede that it contains a *scintilla* of romance. It is a plain, prosaic business of real life as truly as the navigation of the sea. That is not preaching which expends itself in imaginative discussions. In the very nature of the case, preaching is a sound and hopeful business for a practicable object. Its distinguishing characteristic is good sense. We believe this. We come to our work with the conviction that we have a just claim to the approval of the common sense of men, in concentrating our strength upon the work of saving souls. The history of our work proves this. It has been a success: it is a success: its future is a triumph. Our missionaries have stood before princes in this work of saving a world, as calmly as Columbus did when he pleaded for the means of discovering a world. No man who is thoroughly possessed of the evangelical faith on this subject ever has a misgiving respecting it.

4th, And this is true because of a fourth fact in our theory, — that preaching, above all other instrumentalities, is divinely appointed to success in saving men. The gospel proclaimed by the living voice has pre-eminently the divine sanction. Not the press, not the universities, not the libraries of the world, but the

pulpit, is the chief agency concerned in the development of divine decrees to this end. Men exist, ordained to this work by divine appointment. Preaching is performed thus under the shadow of an Almighty Presence: it is done in execution of an Infinite Will. This, also, we believe. We come to our work impelled to it by an eternal decree. For this cause came we into the world. We do not appreciate our calling until we accept it as a calling of God, a high calling, a calling for which we have reason to revere ourselves. We are not qualified for our work if we do not accept in holy faith this fact of a divine indwelling.

5th, A fifth fact in the evangelical theory of preaching is that the philosophy of its working is in entire accordance with the laws of the human mind. Not only is success in preaching practicable, not only is it ordained of God, but the *rationale* of the process by which it achieves success contains nothing contradictory to the laws of the human mind, or suspensive of those laws. Divine decree in the work does not ignore those laws. Decree embraces and energizes the very laws by which mind acts on mind in this work. Preaching therefore has no concern with any miraculous process in its ways of working. Conversion is not a miracle. Persuasion to repentance is not a miracle. Persuasion by preaching is achieved by the very same means and methods of speech by which men are successfully moved by eloquent address on other than religious subjects of human thought. On the evangelical theory the pulpit claims no exemption from dependence on natural laws. We do not expect to escape the consequences of their violation. We entertain no such notion of dependence on the Holy Ghost as to encourage neglect or abuse of the arts of

speech. We use those arts, depend upon them, look for success in them, as if we had no other hope of success than that which encourages speech in the senate or at the bar. This again we believe. We come to our work as philosophers as well as preachers. The telescope is not constructed with faith in the operation of natural laws more wisely than the theory of preaching is with faith in the laws of the human mind.

The point respecting these five truths which I would emphasize is this, that successful preachers, whatever they may believe, or think they believe, of some of these truths abstractly, always assume the validity of every one of them in that preaching which achieves their success. Necessitarians, as well as their opponents, always preach as if these things were true, whenever they succeed in persuading men to repent. From such preaching these principles are every one of them logical inferences, whatever the preacher may theoretically believe or deny. In every genuine success they preach as if men were in the emergency of lost souls; they preach as if the provisions of grace were adequate to the salvation of all men; they preach as if preaching were a sensible business of real life; they preach as if they were called of God, and ordained to his work; they preach as if they must succeed by the natural use of natural laws, and as if they had nothing else on which to build a hope of success. No matter what they believe outside of the pulpit, in the pulpit, and when the prophetic baptism is upon them, they preach as if all these things were true. Other things being equal, success is proportioned to the consistency and the energy with which they act on these assumptions. The more genially the head and the heart unite in accepting these principles as the basis of operation, the more joyous is the work, and the more magnificent its results.

Such a theory of preaching as is here delineated, it needs hardly to be said, must inevitably work out intense applications of truth in practice. Directness, pungency, versatile invention, studied adjustments of truth to character, ingenuity in discovery of the uses of the truth spring forth from such a theory through indubitable intuitions. William Jay remarks of the preaching of the Rev. Dr. Davies, one of his contemporaries, that he preached like a man who "never looked off from the value of a soul." Yet the worth of the soul is only one of the cosmical ideas of our Christian faith. Infuse them all into the conceptions which a preacher has of his work as a practical business, and where can you find a combination of moral forces which can equal them in giving power to human speech?

This suggests another fact which deserves special mention. It is, that, under such a theory of preaching, the pulpit ought to present examples of effective eloquence superior to the productions of the great secular orators of history. The most illustrious secular orators have been great in their practical uses of truth. As we might expect, their power has culminated in their conclusions. There they have girded themselves for the conquest of their audiences. The ancient orators threw the utmost vehemence of appeal into their perorations. Their whole reserve of might and will was often hurled in that last onset upon the will of their hearers. They studied, planned, executed, finished their conclusions, with most sedulous care. Their fame rests more securely upon their perorations than upon any other one feature of their oratory.

Modern eloquence, also, has examples of the same concentration of force, and impetuosity of movement, and premeditated skill, in conclusions. The closing

paragraphs of Edmund Burke's first speech on the impeachment of Warren Hastings did more to create and perpetuate his fame than any other passage of his writings. Hastings himself said, that, in listening to them, he felt himself to be the most guilty man alive. Those paragraphs Burke elaborated sixteen times before their delivery. Lord Brougham's conclusion of his defense of Queen Caroline established his fame as an advocate more securely than any thing else of equal length that he ever wrote. That conclusion he wrote and re-wrote twenty times. Probably with no thought of rhetorical art as such, these men achieved these triumphs of oratorical genius through the mere concentration of their whole mental and moral being upon the attainment of their objects.

The fact, then, which such examples suggest to our present purpose, is, that, under the evangelical theory of preaching, the pulpit ought often to exceed such oratory in the power of its applications. Those applications ought to be more studiously premeditated, and more profoundly inspired, than those of secular speech, by as much as the themes are more weighty, and the resources of appeal to the sensibilities of men are more intense. With no consciousness whatever of oratorical aim as such, and specially none of oratorical ambition, preachers may reasonably be expected often to exceed the eloquence of the senate and the bar, through the mere intensity of the oratorical instinct, aroused and swayed by those immeasurable forces which are found in the elements of our theology.