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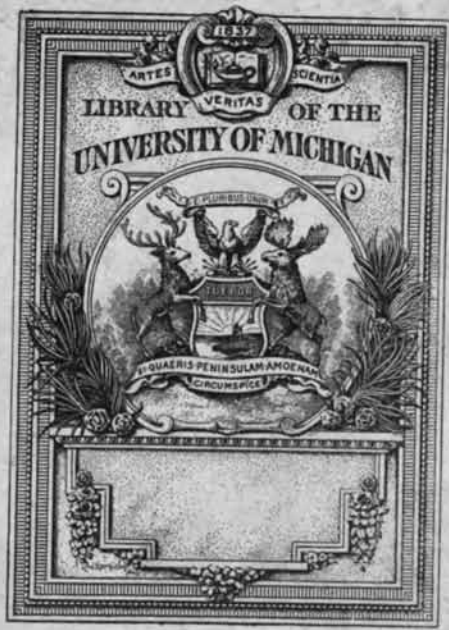
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THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

AUSTIN PHELPS, D.D.

LATE BARTLET PROFESSOR OF SACRED RHETORIC IN ANDOVER
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1895

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A few of the more unusual ones I will define for you on the page on which they are used. But this will not be done very often throughout the textbook.

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PREFACE.

Two methods of discussion are practicable to an instructor in homiletics. They are called, not very accurately, the *practical* and the *scientific* methods. These terms are open to the objection, that, on a theme like this, a scientific treatise must be infirm, if it is not also practical; and a practical treatise must be equally infirm, if it is not also scientific.

Yet these terms do convey a hint of the elements which preponderate in the two modes of discussion. By the one, homiletics is treated chiefly as a science, and is developed chiefly by scientific analysis, and in its relation to kindred sciences. The resulting treatise is valuable to a student mainly as a means of mental discipline. It would be formed, ultimately, on the model of Aristotle's system of rhetoric. By the other method, homiletics is treated, not unscientifically indeed, yet with regard chiefly to its practical uses. The German theologians, with greater accuracy of terms than that of our American nomenclature, consider it a branch of "practical theology." Such it undoubtedly is. Thus defined and developed, it would form a treatise valuable to a student chiefly as a practical guide and help to the

work of the pulpit. The one of these methods of treatment is the more apt to the study of the *science* for the purpose of liberal culture only: the other is the more necessary to the study of the *art* in a professional seminary.

For reasons quite obvious, I have chosen the second of the two methods here indicated, in the construction of the present volume. Very soon after I began to lecture in the department, I formed the habit of preserving manuscript notes of the inquiries of students in the lecture-room and in private conversations. Those notes soon grew upon my hands immensely. Answers to those inquiries constitute nine-tenths of this volume. Whatever value my work may possess is due largely to the fact that it is a *growth* from such practical resources, suggested by practical minds, eager in their youthful outlook upon the most practical of the liberal professions, approaching it with intensely practical aims, and prompt to put the instructions they might receive to immediate practical uses. It would have been difficult to engage such hearers with any enthusiasm in listening to a purely scientific treatise, orally delivered, on such a theme. Of all subjects for the lecture-room, literary criticism pure and simple is the most inert. It must fall flat, even from the lips of genius.

I have carried the subordination of scientific to practical inquiry so far, that I have often used the analysis of a sermon as a line of suggestion to which to attach matter of practical moment related to the theory of preaching, yet not strictly a part of it. From this liberty of discussion has arisen the feature of *excursus*, which will be observed in the structure of these lectures. In this, also, I have followed the lead of the actual inquiries of my pupils.

By retaining the forms of oral delivery in the publication of this work, I have aimed to make it (though necessarily with large omissions and condensations, especially of illustrative material) as nearly as possible an exact transcript of the work of my lecture-room. As such it is offered, with very kindly recollections, to those who are still living of the more than twelve hundred students, who, in the course of thirty-one years, have given me their patient and attentive hearing; of whom I gratefully record the fact, that not a solitary exception has ever given me occasion for rebuke or admonition.

While thus constructed primarily for professional readers, this volume will be found to contain much, I hope, which will be of interest to thoughtful laymen. My hearers in the lecture-room will bear me witness that I have never lost sight of that large and increasing portion of our laity who have very pronounced ideas of their own of the true theory of preaching, however little they may know or care for its scientific forms. I have recognized the fact that to their experienced judgment my own work must be ultimately submitted in the life's work of my students; and that no theory of a sermon can be worth discussion, which does not succeed in adjusting preaching, as a practical business, to the large common sense of Christian hearers.

It is due to Professor M. Stuart Phelps that I should acknowledge his vigilant and scholarly aid in the revision of my manuscript, especially in making the necessary eliminations of material, and in otherwise editing the present work.

ANDOVER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
March, 1881.

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LECTURE I.

THE SERMON : ITS GENERIC IDEA.

HOMILETICS is the science which treats of the nature the classification, the analysis, the construction, and the composition of a sermon. More concisely it is the science of that of which preaching is the art, and a sermon is the product. What, then, is the relation of homiletics to rhetoric? Homiletics *is* rhetoric, as illustrated in the theory of preaching. Rhetoric is the genus: homiletics is the species.

I. What is the generic idea of a sermon? It may be expressed in cumulative form in the following theses.

1st, A sermon is an *oral address*. It is something distinct from an essay or a book. If well constructed, it has peculiarities of structure adapting it to oral delivery, and in some respects unfitting it for private reading. In this respect a sermon illustrates the radical idea of all true eloquence. It must be conceded to the advocates of exclusively extemporaneous preaching, that the extemporaneous ideal is the true one of

perfect public speech. A perfect orator would never write: he would always speak. The mutual magnetism between speaker and hearer would bear him on, without the aid of manuscript or memory. The custom of preaching written discourses grows out of mental infirmities. In any form of speech, be it written or oral, we make but an approximation to perfect oratory; and the true policy of the pulpit is to combine the weight of material which the pen commands with the ease, the versatility, the flexible expression, and the quickness of transition which belong to good extemporaneous speech. The ideal sermon aims to blend the qualities of the essay with those of the speech. That is like mingling the properties of a solid and a fluid: but in the paradoxical union, the fluid has always the ascendancy. The sermon is a speech before it is any thing else. Nothing else should deprive it of the qualities of speech. The oral elements of a sermon usually grow, in a preacher's estimate, with the growth of his experience. Dr. Archibald Alexander of Princeton abandoned the pen entirely in his later years, when time had given him command of accumulated materials, so that he could always extemporize from a full mind. He once said, that if he were on trial for his life, and his acquittal depended on a single effort of his own, he would trust to his lips rather than to his pen.

2d, A sermon is an oral address *to the popular mind*. It is distinct from a scientific lecture, from a judicial oration, from a harangue to a rabble, from a talk to children. The best test of a good sermon is the instinct of a heterogeneous audience. That is not good preaching which is limited in its range of adaptation to select audiences: be it select intelligence, or select ignorance, it matters not. The pulpit permits no selection. It

exists not for the few, not for the many as distinct from the few, but for all. No other variety of public speech is so cosmopolitan in its freedom from provincial limitations as that of the pulpit. To a good preacher his field is literally the world: it is the world of real life, not the world of books alone, not the world of the streets alone, but the world as it is in its completeness and range of character and station. He finds his audience wherever he finds men and women and children. No order of mind is above him, none beneath him. This popular element in the ideal of a sermon is so fundamental, that it should be incorporated into every definition of the thing.

But is not this a degrading idea of a sermon? Do we not let down the intellectual level of the pulpit by insisting upon its cosmopolitan mission? Is it not, at the best, a condescension of intellect to usefulness, when a preacher addresses his whole life's work to the necessities of promiscuous assemblies? Is it not a nobler thing to do to preach to select hearers, whose culture shall give scope to a preacher's loftiest intellectual aspirations? These queries are fundamental to the usefulness of the pulpit. A false theory respecting it is secretly embarrassing and depressing many a preacher in his life's work. It is a sad thing for a man to labor all his life long under the weight of a conflict between professional usefulness and personal culture. Yet such, if I mistake not, is the secret consciousness of many pastors. In some it amounts to a sense of intellectual degradation. Daniel Webster, in the closing years of his life, expressed a profound sense of personal humiliation in having been, through his whole career, so largely engaged in the delivery of electioneering speeches. If he had followed the bent of his tastes, he would never

have spoken in public outside of the United States Senate or the Supreme Court Room. Something akin to this feeling weighs upon the spirits, and depresses the self-respect, of not a few most useful pastors.

Let us see, then, how this matter stands. Is the popular character of the pulpit, in the Christian ideal of it, degrading to it as a representative of intellect and as a stimulus to intellectual culture?

(1) It must be conceded that the affirmative is sustained by the notions current among many literary men. Multitudes of literary men deny to the pulpit the dignity of literature. In their view, it stands below the level of literary criticism. Nothing else fares so severely at the hands of popular critics, nothing else is criticised so flippantly, nothing else is doomed so often by foregone conclusions, or so surely "damned with faint praise," as a volume of sermons from a living and useful pulpit. We are all infected with this disease of critical judgment in the conceptions which we often mean to express by the phrase "popular preaching." "He is a *popular* preacher," we say, with an inflection which means that this is the least respectable thing about him. "Is he a man of talents?"—"Oh, yes! of *popular* talents. He takes well with the multitude; he draws an audience; women weep, and children listen, when he speaks; he can always be sure of a hearing; but"—and so on. A reverent reader of the Scriptures, it is true, will be reminded of Him whom the common people heard gladly; yet the tone of literary disparagement will linger a long time in our ears, notwithstanding. A positive stiffening of self-respect is often needful, that a pastor may hold his head erect against the flings of criticism. Such criticism is literary cant.

(2) This leads me to observe, that the great excellence of a sermon, considered as a specimen of literature alone, is that it sways mind without distinction of class. So far as this aim is reached, it is, in kind, the grandest thing in literature. To make the deep thoughts of theology intelligible to all orders of mind, and impressive to them all, so that the same truth which instructs the ignorant, and quickens the torpid, shall also move the wisest, and command the most alert, is a masterly work of mind. Not a tithe of the standard literature of the world achieves any thing so profound or so brilliant. Plato could not have done it, but St. Paul did it. The profoundest discoveries of ethical science were made intelligible, and, what is vastly more important, were made regenerating forces of thought in the minds of fishermen, by the Sermon on the Mount. Yet all the philosophy which the world reveres bows before the originality of that sermon to-day. Was there intellectual degradation in that? As much as in the humblest labor of a successful pulpit.

Much to the purpose here is an opinion which Guizot has recorded of the nature of genius. In his criticism of the English drama, he expresses his idea of genius in words which are true, without abatement, of the Christian pulpit. He says, "Genius is bound to follow human nature in all its developments. Its strength consists in finding within itself the means of satisfying the whole of the public. [It] should exist for all, and should suffice at once for the wants of the masses and for the requirements of the most exalted minds." What is this, but preaching the gospel to every creature, becoming all things to all men, doing in the simplicity of faith that which every successful preacher does in the result of his life's work? This, then, we pronounce

the intellectual dignity of the pulpit. Why not, as well as of the drama? Considered as the subject of philosophical criticism, the genius of the pulpit corresponds to the genius of that poetry which is world-wide and immortal. A good sermon is a popular production in the same sense in which a good drama is a popular production. A good preacher is a man of the people in the same sense in which Racine and Shakespeare were men of the people. Any thing which grows out of scholastic culture alone, valuable as it may be, is still below the genius which sways the people from the pulpit, in the same sense in which Aristotle was below Homer, and Locke below Milton.

(3) From this view it follows that the sense of self-denial which preachers sometimes express in adapting their sermons to all classes, instead of ministering to a select intelligence, has no virtue in it. Says one of twenty pastors of like mind, in a private letter, "I am throwing myself away in this shoe-town." Very well. he probably could not make a better throw. If he saves a "shoe-town" morally, he lifts it up intellectually to an immense altitude. In the process of doing that, he lifts his own mind to a level of culture and of power which no conservatism of refinement ever rises high enough to overlook. Do not the first ten inches of an oak from the ground measure as much in height as the last ten of its topmost branch? When will the ministry learn that the place where has very little concern with the intellectual worth of the work done? The uplifting anywhere is essentially the same, but with the chances of success all in favor of lifting low down. To the mind of Christ the whole world is a "shoe-town" intellectually. To give it a lift everywhere is the intellectual glory of the pulpit. Deliver

ance from the pettiness of a select ambition is essential to the power to lift it anywhere. If a man is swaying a promiscuous assembly every week, albeit they have waxed and grimy hands; if he is really moving them, educating them, raising them by the eternal thoughts of God up to the level of those thoughts, - he is doing a grander literary work, with more power at both ends of it, than if he were penned in and held down by the *élite* of a city, or the clique of a university. He is plowing a deeper furrow, and subsoiling the field of all culture. The reflex influence of his work upon his own development is more masculine. He is a nobler man for it in intellectual being. There is more of him in the end. He has more to show for his life's work, and more of himself to carry into eternity.

Doddridge speaks with dolorous magnanimity of the effort which it cost him to discard from his style certain words, metaphors, constructions, which his literary taste tempted him to use, but which his conscience rejected as unsuited to the capacities of his hearers. This was mourning the loss of useless tools. Such condescension is in the direct line of scholarly elevation. A man grows in literary dignity with every conquest of that kind which he achieves over himself. It ought not to be suffered to put on the dignity of a self-conquest: it should be the intuition and the joy of a cultivated taste.

(4) An appreciation by the ministry of the dignity of popular success in preaching tends to elevate the intellectual culture of the people. The popular mind grows under any ministry which respects it. Mental strength grows under ministrations which are addressed to mental strength. Treated as if worthy of respect, the common people become the more worthy. Such preaching

always creates a wakeful, thinking commonalty. No matter how low it begins in the social scale, it always builds upward. Historians of the American Revolution express astonishment at the extent to which the most profound principles of government were familiar to the reasonings of the common people of New England at that period. Otis and Adams and Ames never could have argued as they did with a people who had not been trained by a ministry whose pulpit had laid out its strength on the people. They knew no "high" and "low" in the aims of their preaching. They acted on the principle of common sense, that, in building up any thing, the building process is as valuable at the bottom as at the top, and that the bottom may be the more vital to the stability of the structure. Thus acting, with no consciousness of literary theory, they hit upon one of the axioms of literary taste; that the most useful thing for its purpose is the best thing of its kind. Therefore their congregations were what they were, — the foundation and the pillars of a State.

Viewed thus in every light of which it is susceptible, the true ideal of a sermon is reflected back upon us as a production which is popular in the sense of being independent of class, and therefore as belonging to the first rank of literature. Let us admit this; let us model our preaching upon it. As builders of men, let us respect ourselves, and respect our work, in building low down, and in using the tools which our business requires. Let us count that as the most perfect literature, which is most perfectly adjusted to the most perfect ends by the most perfect uses of the materials and the arts of speech. Let us cultivate in this respect the literary taste of Christ. Can you conceive of him as laboring under the burden of literary enthusiasm to

improve and polish the Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes, or the Lord's Prayer, by adapting them more tastefully to the upper classes of Judæa? Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.

3d, A sermon is an oral address to the popular mind, *upon religious truth*. This is too obvious to need further remark than to observe two things. One is, that this quality distinguishes a sermon from secular lectures. Political, historical, scientific, literary discourses may be popularized in their materials and form, and may be orally delivered: the religious theme and discussion are necessary to constitute the sermon. The other is, that nothing is a sermon which is out of the range of the religious necessities of the people. Usefulness of discourse does not make preaching. Theodore Parker once discoursed, on a Sabbath morning, upon the "Prospects of the Democratic Party in America." It may have been a truthful and useful oration, but it was not a sermon. It was not religiously useful. No religious necessities of his audience called for its delivery.

4th, A sermon is an oral address to the popular mind, upon religious truth, *as contained in the Christian Scriptures*. Truth is contained in the Bible by expression and by implication. In either mode it has the biblical sanction. Inspiration recognizes sources of religious knowledge outside of itself. A sermon, therefore, may follow the line of biblical recognition, as well as that of the inspired record. A special significance appertains to this alliance of the sermon, in every form and theme of it, with the word of God. This will be evident from observing that natural theology is best adjusted to the uses of the pulpit when it breathes most heartily the biblical spirit. Only

when Christianized in spirit and in form does the religion of nature become on any large scale the power of God unto salvation. The most corrupt civilizations the world has ever seen have existed in the midst of its most impressive natural scenery. A temple of Venus, the scene of the most revolting orgies of Pagan *cultus*, stood in one of the most exquisite valleys of Southern Italy, where, if anywhere, one would suppose that nature would have led men to a spiritual worship. This is a symbol of the fate of natural theology everywhere, when it is left alone to contend with the depravity of the human heart. Be it ever so true or so pure, abrasion with depravity wears it dim, and wears it out, except when it is delivered in its biblical forms, and supported by its biblical auxiliaries. God in Christ, or no God at all, is the alternative suggested by the religious history of mankind.

The identity of a sermon with scriptural types of thought is emphasized, also, by the fact that preaching owes its existence to revealed religion. It is a remarkable fact that the religion of nature isolated from the Scriptures has never been preached on any large scale. Sporadic cases are of no account. Natural religion creates philosophers, and founds academies; it produces priests, and builds temples; it pictures and carves itself in symbols and ceremonies: but it has no churches, no pulpits, no preachers. Vinet says very truly, "There is no Mohammedan church, nor Brahmanical; and certainly there was no church in the religion of Homer." Natural religions all end where Christianity began. They create the temple, the symbol, the priest, the ritual, the choir, in a word, all the functions and the paraphernalia of the *cultus*; and there they stop. Beyond that they have no growth, and no power

of conversion. Among the masses of mankind they do not arouse intelligent thinking enough to create the material on any broad scale for a preacher to work upon. They do not create the desire to be taught, reasoned with, persuaded, preached to, on religious themes. They do but imitate Christianity, when they employ preachers for their propagation. Gibbon speaks of the pulpit of the caliphs. Omar is represented as a preacher; but that conception of Mohammedan oratory was borrowed from the Christian vocabulary. The oral addresses of the caliphs were military harangues, nothing more. Alexander and Napoleon on the eve of battle were as truly preachers as Omar; and their aim of discourse was as really a religious aim as his. Only by a figure of speech, and a delusive one, can Mohammedan discourse be termed "preaching." Of all human systems of thought which have made nations in history, Mohammedanism contains the least material for preaching. It has no subjects for the pulpit. The system is fatalism pure and simple, the most brazen assault upon the common sense of mankind which stands recorded in history. It can not be consistently urged upon the convictions or the sensibilities of men by oratorical persuasion. The Mohammedan is not a proper subject of persuasion. He is not a reasoning being. Fate drives him in grooves. Hence the argument of Mohammedanism is the sword. Preaching, therefore, I repeat, is both theoretically and historically Christian. It owes its existence to the Christian Scriptures; and nothing but the spirit of biblical religion keeps it alive.

This view of the relation of the pulpit to the Bible is confirmed by the fact that retrograde tendencies of the Christian Church from its primeval purity are always tendencies to the disuse of preaching. A slid-

ing scale might be constructed, by which one might gauge the degree of corruption in the Church of the middle ages by the progressive decline of the pulpit. No matter whether the Church succumbed to Paganism or to philosophy, the result was the same: the pulpit succumbed proportionately. While the symbols of Christian worship multiplied in number, and increased in splendor, the symbol of Christian thinking and persuasion sunk into imbecility. When the Church lost its faith in the Bible as the only inspired source of knowledge, then sacerdotalism took the place of religious teaching, and the priesthood became too ignorant or too indolent, or both, to be preachers. Christianity became only a religion of the altar, a *cultus*, just as Paganism had been before it. There is no evidence from the history of Christianity, that worship, however spiritual and intelligent at the outset, can keep itself pure by the working of its own elements. The preservative from putrefaction, the disinfectant of moral disease, so far as human instrumentality is concerned, is the preaching element.

Reformatory struggles in the Church point to the same truth. They have always been aimed at two things which they have kept nearly abreast with each other. One is the restoration of an uncorrupted and unfettered Bible; the other, the revival of the pulpit. The early Waldensian movement in Italy, that of Huss in Bohemia, that of Wickliffe in England, the Reformation of the sixteenth century, we have only to name these, to recall the two great instrumentalities which they exalted, — a free Bible and a free pulpit. The conflict of the Puritans with Queen Elizabeth was waged chiefly around the same two *foci* of the religious thought of England, — the Bible in the homes, and a free pulpit

in the sanctuaries of the people. The Puritans contended for liberty to preach the word of God, and for multiplying the number of priests who could preach it. The papal party in the English Church decried both, and denied the necessity of either. The recovery of the biblical spirit to the piety of England was due to the Puritan prophecyings.

Does not history perpetually repeat itself, in this respect, in our own day? Revivals of religion go hand in hand with a deepened reverence for the Scriptures, and a multiplied use of the pulpit. A dying or a dead Church thrives, if at all, externally on its form of worship. Of evangelical denominations, those which exalt the pulpit above worship have the most vital sympathy with religious awakening among the people. The genius of revivals is germane to them. Those which exalt worship above preaching only tolerate such awakenings, as they feel the distant reflux of them from surrounding sects. In brief, the more exclusive the popular reverence is for the Bible as the only sacred book unrivaled by books of prayer, and catechisms, and confessions of faith, and the more intense the spirituality of the popular interpretation of the Bible unperturbed by the love of forms, so much the more exalted is the respect of the people for the pulpit, and so much the more vital is preaching to their religious faith. Such is the law of religious life as evolved from the history of the Church. Account for it as we may, somehow the pulpit and the Bible go together. If the one sinks, it carries down the other: if the one drops out of the popular faith, the other dies. Neither is ever resuscitated alone. It is not, therefore, a narrow conception of a sermon, if we incorporate into its very definition the fact of its dependence on a revealed religion, and that, the religion of the Scriptures.