

THE THEORY OF PREACHING

LESSON XL.

Ed. Note: Once more I feel impelled to warn you to take heed to the homiletic principles put forth by brother Phelps and leave his Calvinistic leanings alone. Calvinism is an unbiblical concept that does much violence to the Scriptures in its attempts to prove what are untenable precepts. In this section brother Phelps' Calvinism is paraded openly. I ask you to please leave his Calvinism alone but feel free to espouse his teachings on homiletics.

He was an admirable teacher of homiletic principles, so please remember him in that light. - Dr. VBK

Comment on Lesson XL.

The lesson you are about to study is beneficial for not only its encouragements to minister to all classes of people, both “high” and “low”; but also for its insight into, and its giving of, the historical account of the beginnings of the distancing of the “clergy,” specifically mentioning the clergy of the Presbyterians and Methodists, from the common people.

At the time brother Phelps was writing, the dichotomy by lines of class in access, and usefulness, of religious teachings and preachings, and the acceleration of the promotion of position and scholasticism over that of practical ministry aimed at all of mankind, was a dark foreboding of a future that has now come fully to pass in the 21st century. In our post-Christian culture, here in the United States and in all other countries that once promoted the gospel worldwide, preeminently England comes to mind along with others, the effect of the churches on everyday life is now mostly nill. There are a few bright spots from time to time when biblical principles are brought up as weapons against, or hindrances to, the march of ungodliness; but, these are now few and far between. And the minions of the devil, because of the atrocious state of affairs in general in the world today, use the open statements made and stands taken based upon those biblical principles as weapons against the politicians and activists who make them and/or stand for them. Through their manipulations of words and facts and their playing upon the natural lusts and wants of an unregenerate population, the ungodly manipulators turn those who thus stand, in the minds of the populace, into apparent fanatics who are marching against the progress of mankind, instead of defenders of the rights and responsibilities of mankind as presented in God’s Word, which are only for the supreme benefit of mankind.

The historical glimpses given in this chapter into the beginnings of the decline of true Christianity and the loss of the effectiveness of the pulpit and the churches on the progress and improvement of civilization is, at the least, interesting and useful; and, at the most, a clear guide into why and how the world began its determined march in a direction directly away from God. A march that has now accelerated beyond belief. - Dr. VBK

LESSON XL.

LECTURE XL.

CONCLUDING LECTURE: MINISTERIAL CULTURE.

GENTLEMEN, I complete to-day the course of homiletic lectures, the delivery of which you have made a pleasure to me by the kindness of your attention. I am constrained, by certain convictions which are sometimes a burden to me, to add a few words of comment upon the general drift of the instructions to which you have listened, and the spirit in which they should be applied to your life's work.

My treatment of the theory of preaching has grown up, in a course of years, on that model of homiletic teaching which the Calvinistic mind has generally held to be essential to the training of a preacher. The ideal of a preacher which I have uniformly had in view is that of a Christian scholar using his scholarship with the aim of a Christian orator. I have spoken to a group of scholarly hearers, and have aimed to help you to a more enlarged growth of scholarly culture. I do this every year, with an increasing conviction, that, as it respects intellectual preparation for the pulpit, this high Calvinistic ideal of a preacher is the true one. I can not believe that any less severe ideal is equal to the range of apostolic thought on the subject.

At the same time, I have found, by the side of this conviction, another, which is also deepening with years.

I have tried, in various parts of these lectures, to give you a hint of it in the way of warning. It is that our Protestant denominations are not in all respects using this theory of high culture in the ministry in a Christian way. Somehow or other, it is not working altogether right in practice. I acknowledge some alarm at the prospect before us, if the present drift of things, in one respect, be not arrested. A scholarly ministry, taken as a whole, we must confess is working away from the unscholarly masses of the people. Perhaps it would be more strictly accurate to say that the unscholarly masses are working away from it. But practically this makes no difference. The ministry is in its conception aggressive, not receptive. The commission is, "Go," not "Wait."

In Great Britain the fact is attracting more attention every year, that the clergy and the people are drifting asunder, and, I repeat, it makes no difference which is anchored, if the other is moving. The religious press of England and Scotland confesses the sundering. Infidel critics triumph over it. "The Westminster Review" discusses the fact, as one which candid men will not dispute. "The London Times" and "The Saturday Review" explicitly affirm that the clergy are no longer leaders of the religious thought of England. Reformers and statesmen are looking about them for other agencies than those of the Church and the pulpit to elevate the degraded, and control the "dangerous" classes. Is it not an ominous event, that, in a country which Christianity has civilized for a thousand years, vast masses of society should be so vast and so brutal as to be classified in the national mind by that title "dangerous"? They are no longer thought of by statesmen as objects of hope, scarcely even of compas-

sion, but simply as a threat hanging over the safety of the rest. They are given up to the police.

In our own country, with the advantages of our voluntary system in the support of the gospel, the same widening of the distance between the Protestant ministry and the masses is palpable. Politicians accept the fact, and act upon it. The secular press, to a great extent, treats it flippantly. Meanwhile what are our churches and ministry doing about it? Much that is cheering, but somewhat that is not so.

In the Episcopal Church it is frequently claimed, by a minority, I am glad to believe, that it is the mission peculiar to that branch of the Church to reach the cultivated strata of society. Many times have graduates of this seminary who possessed more than the average of gentlemanly address, and familiarity with cultivated society, been told that they had too much culture to waste themselves in the charge of missionary churches. In some cases, the gilded bait has been caught at. Worldly wisdom charges upon churches of Puritan origin, that they have in them the elements of low life; that their historical antecedents are not respectable; that their founders were low-born and low-bred; that their social affinities are not those of culture and refinement; and that therefore a re-action from them is periodically inevitable. From such argument one might reasonably infer that the chief glory of a church is to gather to its bosom the *élite* of cultivated life, to minister to the masses by churchly authority rather than by sympathy, and to rescue from low-bred sects the "Martyrs of Disgust."

Yet in our own churches, and in the whole Presbyterian group, the present drift of things is, to a considerable extent, in the same direction. The under-

current may still be right in the main; but many of the surface-currents, and certain local currents, are not so. Our craving for artistic music, worldly views of what constitutes ministerial success, and, more than all else, the principle of elective affinity in the gathering of churches, by which identity of social rank is made to mark practically the outline of church-membership, and still more sharply that of Christian fellowship, — are all tending the same way. It is not difficult to see whither.

Yet the complaint is universal among us, that a less proportion of the uneducated masses of American birth is to be found in Calvinistic churches than was found there thirty years ago. Christian men are innocently wondering, and inquiring, "Why is this?" We are entering upon an era of experiments for remedying the evil. I have not a word to say against those experiments. They may all be excellent in their way. They are all welcome, as evidence that good men are feeling after the right way. But this fact is observable in them thus far, that, to a large extent, — not entirely, — they either leave the clergy out of the question, or assign to them a false position. We are creating vast organizations of lay-laborers, Sabbath-schools, mission-schools, mission-chapels, young men's Christian associations, colporters, Bible-readers, etc., to reach the masses of the people, because of the admitted fact that our pulpit, as administered to our own wants and tastes, does not reach them. We are working, in great part, upon a system which takes it for granted that our own clergy, in our own churches, can not reach them. In some cases, the avowal is whispered that we do not want to reach them there.

We are looking more and more to divine interposition in raising up men of exceptional zeal and tact as

evangelists, at whose feet our scholarly and learned clergy sit for instruction, given not always in even grammatical English. That was a most humiliating circumstance to the cultivated clergy of one of our Atlantic cities, that the chairman of a meeting assembled to devise plans for the continuance of special services, and other efforts for a revival of religion, told the audience that the evangelist who had been laboring there would bring to them certain clergymen and other helpers from abroad, who would be *qualified* to carry on the work. As if the corps of pastors of all denominations with which that city was blessed—admitted to be unsurpassed in culture and in training for the pulpit—were incompetent for such a service, and exceptional men, clerical and laical, must be sought out, and brought from afar. This surely is an abnormal state of things. It ought to have set every thoughtful man to searching below the surface for the causes and the remedy.

Even in the Methodist churches, the boast of which, from the time of John Wesley, has been their apostolic adaptation to the lower classes of society, the same complaint begins to be heard. Recent Methodist authorities say that they are losing in some degree their ancient hold upon the lower orders of the people. They affirm that the spirit of their denomination is rising in the direction of refinement, of education, of social position, and pecuniary beneficence: but they are not lifting the masses with them: they are simply soaring overhead. The ideal of an educated ministry being of recent origin in the Methodist Church, many earnest friends of culture there think they see that the work of clerical education is not wholly a gain. They acknowledge, that, as their ministers become more

highly cultivated, their tendency is to work away from those portions of the people which are not so. Like seeks its like. The danger is that nature will outweigh grace. Their educated preachers and their humble classes are in peril of parting company, because they are in peril of losing sympathy.

In view of these facts, it is not strange if the whole question of clerical education undergoes revision. It must not be wondered at, if many Christian laymen infer that our process of cultivation is a destructive one. It is not unnatural that one of them should say, as he did, "Our ministers are educated to death;" or that another should write, "They are so trained as to make it difficult for the churches to support them with their expensive tastes;" or that a third should believe that "they are so cultivated as to indispose them to become pastors of rural churches;" or that a fourth should affirm that "they are so made over by ten years of scholastic seclusion as to wither their godly sympathy with the people everywhere." All this, and much more, is said by laymen in their conversations and correspondence on the subject. You perceive inklings of it now and then in the reports of public assemblies.

I do not indorse these criticisms; far from it. Indeed, so far as my observation goes, the men who make them do not express in them their own personal wants, but what they suppose to be the wants of others. I have yet to find the first layman, with intelligence enough to have a reasonable opinion on such a subject, who wants any other than the first order of intellect, and the most perfect culture, in the person of his own pastor. Still, such criticisms contain a truth; and they may become wholly true, unless the clergy prevent that

result, each in his own experience. The youthful clergy have a special responsibility respecting it. Dr. Emmons said that he never expected to convince a man of any thing which he did not already believe, after the age of forty years. There is less of hyperbole in this as applied to educated mind than as applied to the illiterate. Clerical mind, especially after spending fifteen years in the pulpit, exercising there the authority of a religious teacher, is apt, from that time onward, to float on currents of opinion formed and set during those years. The junior ministry, therefore, must commonly change the currents of clerical practice, if they need change.

I wish, therefore, to commit these homiletic discussions to you with the most solemn charge that you receive them with a spirit of *practical good sense and of practical piety*. These two things are the substance of the whole matter. I have tried to proportion the theory of preaching as symmetrically as I could. But in a thousand applications of it you must do the work of adjusting its proportions. You must qualify rules. You must balance principles. You must interpret precepts in the light of circumstances. You must judge when it is a use, and when it is an abuse, of any truth you may have heard here, to apply it to your own practice. Good sense and piety should shape your applications of it, as of all knowledge, and always should so shape them as to *make* your pulpit reach the masses of the people.

I tell you frankly, that no theory of preaching is worth a farthing which can not be worked practically to that result. No theory of ministerial culture is either scriptural, or philosophical, or sensible, which can not bridge the gulf between the clergy and the masses.

The pulpit never can accomplish its mission on any such theory — never.

The methods of lay labor which are so popular at present for the evangelizing of the masses, and which, in the main, are so hopeful a sign of our times, are defective, and will fail, just so far as they assume to confine to laymen the duty of personal contact with the lower orders, and to exalt the clergy into an upper layer of influence, in which they shall simply be preachers to select hearers, and teachers of teachers, reaching the people only by proxy. No preacher can afford that kind of seclusion. Such an adjustment of powers in the Church is hierarchical. The philosophy of it is priestly. It is a return to the genius of Judaism and of Paganism. Nothing could doom the clergy to a wasted life more fatally.

If I could be persuaded that the theory of ministerial culture which I have tried to represent to you could result legitimately in any such drifting asunder of the pulpit and the lower orders of society, I would abandon the whole of it. I would drop it as I would a viper. A preacher had better work in the dark, with nothing but mother-wit, a quickened conscience, and a Saxon Bible to teach him what to do and how to do it, than to vault into an aerial ministry in which only the upper classes shall know or care any thing about him. You had better go and *talk* the gospel in the Cornish dialect to those miners who told the witnesses summoned by the committee of the English Parliament, that they had “never heard of Mister Jesus Christ in these mines,” than to do the work of the Bishop of London. Make your ministry reach the people; in the forms of purest culture if you can, but reach the people; with elaborate doctrine if possible,

but reach the people ; with classic speech if it may be, but reach the people. The great problem of life to an educated ministry is to make their culture a power, instead of a luxury. Our temptations are all one way. Our mission is all the other way.

It is not, then, less education that our clergy need. It is inconceivable to me how any educated man can see relief from our present dangers, or from any dangers, in that direction. Ignorance is a remedy for nothing. Imperfection of culture is always a misfortune.

Some remarks made once at a meeting of the General Association of Massachusetts, suggested, if correctly reported, a reduction of the term of years in our seminaries for all students of theology, and hinted at the need of "recovery" from the influence of the training in theological seminaries. Every truly educated man knows better. We do not want inferior culture, if we can get any thing else. The world will not bear it from us when it can command any thing else. If this world is ever to be converted to Christ by other than highly educated agencies, it must be by the aid of miraculous agencies. Nothing short of inspiration and miracle ever has made ignorance and low culture successful in the propagation of Christianity on any large scale and for a long period of time ; and nothing short of such powers ever can do it. But miracle and inspiration we can not look for. In place of them we must look for consecration of culture. This is the thing which the world is blindly craving. We need subjection of the personal tastes, which high culture creates, to apostolic and Christlike motive. We need contentment under the limitations of culture, which the necessities of labor in our profession demand. We need to

revise our theories, and moderate our desires, respecting pecuniary support. Are we right, are we apostolic, in the conviction that we must live in such a style that we can not obey a call of God and of his Church to the humblest fields of pastoral usefulness? Does not this conviction imply a mistake in our self-adjustments to the work of Christ?

Above all, we need faith in the Christian ideal of culture which measures its value by its use, its dignity by its lowliness, its height in character by its depth of reach after souls below it. This was Christ's own ideal of culture. He possessed no other; he respected no other; he denounced every other most fearfully. Not an act of his life, not a word from his lips, gives any evidence that he would have tolerated the awful anomaly of clerical life in which a man ministers placidly in a palatial church to none but elect and gilded hearers, with all the paraphernalia of elegance around him, and with culture expressed in the very fragrance of the atmosphere; while "Five Points," and "Bow-eries," and "Ann Streets," are growing up, uncared for by any labors of his, within hearing of his organ and his quartet.

Our guard against the peril here indicated, then, is spiritual, as distinct from intellectual, in its nature. The cry should be, not "Less intellect, less study, less culture," but simply, "More heart, more prayer, more godliness, more subjection of culture to the salvation of those who have little or none of it."

I beg you to ponder the subject in this spirit, and to begin your ministry with a bold rejection of every thing that implies your personal seclusion from the poor and the ignorant classes. Reject every theory of preaching which contemplates that seclusion as a necessity. Rec-

tify the proportions of any theory, which, though true in its parts, yet, as a whole, blocks your way to the hearts of the people. Prune down any theory, which, for reasons yet unknown to you, you can not work to advantage, so as to make your way to the people's hearts. Stretch your theory to the facts of your life's work, be they what they may. Hold no theory for a day which is not elastic enough to compass the necessities of your position. I have failed in my endeavors to help you, if you have derived from my words any such theory.

Esteem no institution sacred which sets you above and aloof from the commonalty. Revere no clerical usages, no laws of etiquette, no guards of your reputation, no proprietary claims, which require you to hold back from personal labor with the humblest or the most guilty. Yield to no churchly sentiments, or whispered arrangements, or tacit understandings, or unuttered disgusts, through which churches shall be gathered by the law of social affinity, instead of the law of benevolence; so that their pastors can not get at the poor and the degraded, because there are none such within hearing.

Refuse to be pastors of such churches, if they insist upon their exclusiveness. Accept, rather, the calls of the "low-born and low-bred." Accept the "plain living and high thinking," if they are necessary to give you access to the low grounds of society, unless you can clearly justify to your own conscience your right and duty to do otherwise. Let it be said of you, "This man eateth with publicans and sinners," unless you can give a reason to ministering angels and to God for choosing rather to eat with princes and magnates of the earth. Refuse to be tempted by churches in which

pageantry of architecture, pomp of worship, operatic music, patrician caste, sumptuous dress, and other forms of unchristian luxury will conspire against you, making it impossible for the poor to be there if they would, and making them unwilling to be there if they could. The man was never born who could long carry the load of such a church as that with a Christ-like love of souls in his heart.

The spirit which should lead you anywhere into Christian work should be that which we commonly laud as the missionary spirit. That type of character and that habit of mind which time has clothed with romance in the persons of Henry Martyn, and William Carey, and Alexander Duff, are the same which should carry any man anywhere as a preacher of Christ. In no other spirit is a man called to preach at all.

Begin, I pray you, begin your work, with faith in the practicability of this. Believe that you can go to your metropolitan pulpit in Boston, or New York, with the same Christ-like mind with which you would expect to go to Beyroot, or to the Zulus. There is no difference between the two. The call of God which summons you to the pulpit means the same thing everywhere. If you do not feel this, if the missionary question does not leave you here at home with entire repose of conscience, if you are entering on your life's work here on a lower level of Christian life than you would think necessary if you sought commission from foreign missionary boards, be sure that you are beginning wrong. You are not yet at peace with God in this thing. It is not God's call that you hear.

Look at the elder President Edwards. What do we know of him? We know him as a philosopher. We know him as pastor of one of the then most powerful

churches of New England. We know him as president of one of the most venerable colleges of America. We know him as the humble missionary to the Indians at Stockbridge. Yet is he not in all these positions of ministerial labor the same kind of man in character? Did not the same consecration lead him to every one of them? Did not the same type of Christian life move him to write the "Essay on the Will," which dictated his sermon at Enfield, and his missionary talks at Stockbridge? As the peer and the rival of David Hume and John Locke, does he not seem to us precisely the same Christ-like man that he was as the biblical teacher of Pequot children?

That is the true ideal of a Christian minister. He should be able to go, without a ripple of difference in his sense of personal distinction, to the Feejee Islands, or to the Fifth Avenue in New York. Pass on to your work, brethren, in that spirit of profound consecration and repose of conscience. Get down to those deep soundings of the sea of the life that is with God. Then God will make your life a song to you.

Make sure you have the final copies of your Cumulative Summary and Outline nearly completed. You will be required to submit both of them at the end of the next Lesson.