

LESSON X.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE X.

THE EXPLANATION: DEFINITION, OBJECTS, MATERIALS.

HAVING finished the discussion of the text of a sermon, we proceed now to that feature of discourse which has been entitled the explanation.

I. What is the explanation? It is that part of a sermon which comprehends all those remarks of which the object is to adjust the meaning of the text to the homiletic use which is to be made of it.

1st, Observe that it is not entirely identical with the process by which we have characterized an explanatory sermon. All that is needful to constitute a sermon of that class is that the main process of it be explanatory of something. But the explanation as a part of a topical sermon concerns exclusively the text and its contemplated uses. It may not be the chief feature of a discourse: it may be the briefest incident to the chief discussion.

2d, Further: the explanation as executed should be distinguished from the process of investigation. This is self-evident when stated, but the statement is essential. Explanation, it should always be remembered, is an after-process to that of discovery: it concerns the results of investigation, not the process. The expounder ceases, for the time, to be an investigator. The speaker is no longer a recluse. Some essentials

of good preaching grow out of this truism, and yet are often sacrificed by forgetting it.

3d, Moreover, the explanation in a sermon is often distinct from exegesis in a commentary. These may be synonymous, but they are not necessarily so. Exegesis concerns a text, with no reference to its homiletic uses: the explanation concerns a text, with no other reference than to its homiletic uses. It explains the text, therefore, only so far, and with such incidents of illustration, as the object of the sermon requires. Its aim is to make the text useful. Beyond this, the sermon finds no place for a text, and therefore no place for its explanation. Exegesis, then, is no more a model for homiletic explanations than the homiletic explanation is for exegesis in a commentary. The two things differ as their uses differ.

4th, Moreover, the explanation, as a part of a topical or a textual sermon, is distinct from exposition in an expository sermon. The distinction is, that the one is only a preliminary, while the other is the bulk of the sermon. Rhetorically this distinction is not radical. The rhetorical process in the two specimens of composition is the same. The principles which we are about to consider, therefore, have a double importance. They are suggested by the explanation as a fragment of a topical sermon; but they cover, as well, the whole subject of expository preaching. What the explanation in a topical sermon is, that the body of an expository sermon is, with this difference only, that one is preliminary, and the other not. We discuss the explanation, then, not merely as one part in the analysis of a sermon, but also as a rhetorical specimen of expository discourse. I prefer, for the sake of rhetorical unity, to discuss the subject of expository preaching in this connection, rather than to treat it as a distinct theme.

II. We pass, in the second place, to consider more specifically the objects of the explanation.

1st, Of these, may be named, first, verbal criticism. Certain texts require this, and nothing more.

Verbal criticism may take the form of an analysis of the text. A text sometimes needs to be partitioned in order to be appreciated. Significant words need to be distinguished; points of emphasis need to be made obvious; an ellipsis may need to be amplified; a person implied may need to be expressed. An illustration of some of these objects is found in a discourse published by the late Rev. Dr. Tyler of East Windsor. On the text, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely," the preacher proceeds in his explanation to inquire: 1. Who utters this language? 2. What is the offer made in this language? 3. On what condition is the offer made? Having thus developed the forcible points in the text, he deduces the proposition that nothing hinders the salvation of any man but his own will. The explanation here consists of verbal criticism in the form of an analysis of the text. Again: verbal criticism may be necessary in the form of definition. This will sometimes be the object. Mr. Robertson, in a sermon on the text, "For their sakes I sanctify myself," devotes nearly the whole of his explanation to a definition of the word "sanctify" as applied to the Son of God. His whole sermon hinges on that definition. Again: verbal criticism may be necessary in the form of verbal paraphrase. This is only a succession of definitions. It is often necessary as a translation from the antique dialect of the Scriptures into the language of modern life. Verbal criticism, again, may be necessary in the form of correction of the text. If the English version be wrong, the aim of the sermon may require

that it be righted. If the English version be obscure, the design of the sermon may require that it be made clear.

2d, A second object of an explanation may be logical adjustment.

The logical relations of the text to the context may need to be adjusted. A text intelligible in itself may seem to contradict the context. It may seem to be irrelevant to the context. It may be parenthetical. Its truth—if not its truth, its force; if not its force, its pertinence—may depend on certain logical connections with the context, which are not obvious. To make them obvious may be all the exposition which the text demands. The logical relations of the text to other portions of the Scriptures than the context may require adjustment. Some passages instantly suggest apparently contradictory passages. An explanation achieves much for a sermon, if it makes distant Scriptures buttress a text. The relations of a text to arguments confirmatory of its interpretation may require adjustment. Much to the purpose is often accomplished by showing briefly that a metaphorical text resembles a similar metaphor in modern *usus loquendi*. The protection of a text from a distorted literalism may depend on matching it well with homely examples of common speech. The relations of a text to certain intuitions of man may need adjustment. One of the first duties of a preacher is to keep inspired language in line with the necessary beliefs of men. Isolated as texts are from their inspired connections, they often seem to contradict our intuitions, when, if located in their places, they do not so contradict them. No wise preacher will drag a text through a sermon with the semblance or the suspicion of contradiction to intuitions. On the

other hand, it is often a grand support to a text to shape its explanation so as to suggest its clear coincidence with an intuition.

3d, A third object of an explanation may be rhetorical amplification. Oftener than otherwise, this is the chief object. A text which needs no verbal criticism and no logical adjustment may need to be amplified. The Bible is a book of suggestions mainly. Texts, especially, are but hints. An explanation should often expand them; sometimes it should magnify them. It should do the work of the telescope, in bringing a distant truth near, and of the microscope, in disclosing the beauty of a minute truth. Rhetorical amplification may assume either or both of two forms. It may be illustrative paraphrase. This differs from verbal paraphrase only in being constructed for illustration instead of interpretation of a text. The aim is to give not merely a new version, but an illumination of the text. The other form of rhetorical amplification is that of descriptive incident. This adds to paraphrase of a text its surroundings in the inspired narrative. The object is the same as before, — to educe the full force of the text.

A careful study of the demands of a text in respect to these several objects of explanations will save a preacher from needless and aimless expositions. The inquiry should be, Does the text, for the use to which I am to put it in this sermon, demand either of these objects? Does, or does not, the full force of the text, for my use of it, lie on the face of it? If it does, then no explanation is required. If given, it will be only an encumbrance, as many long-winded, expository introductions are.

III. From these objects of the explanation, we pro-

ceed, in the third place, to consider the materials of explanations. Bearing in mind the relation of the subject to expository preaching, this inquiry assumes more importance than if it were limited to a fragment of discourse. The chief design in discussing it is to answer it homiletically, by showing how this part of a discourse, and how expository sermons in full, may be adjusted to popular presentation. The laws of exegesis, of course, underlie the whole question. Homiletics has somewhat to say, however, of a preacher's use of those laws in the pulpit.

1st, Of the sources of expository materials, then, should be named first, and, of course, primarily in point of importance, the words of the text. This is obvious.

2d, Equally obvious is a second source; namely, the immediate context. Popular interest in a text will often depend on a skillful use of the context. Sometimes an elaborate use of the context is necessary to disclose any homiletic force in the text itself. The text of a certain discourse is found in Judges xvii. 13: "Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest." What homiletic use does such a text suggest? What hearer, in listening to it, sees in it any thing to quicken interest beyond the momentary wonder that a preacher should found a sermon upon it? But Rev. Dr. Bushnell, by an ingenious yet not forced manipulation of the context, shows that the text is a unique example — perhaps the most pithy one in the Scriptures — of the natural fraternity between wickedness and superstition. Half the vivacity of expository preaching depends on a skillful evolution of texts from their biblical surroundings.

3d, This suggests a third source of the materials of explanations; namely, the scope of the whole argument

from which a text is taken. Not merely the text, not merely the immediate context, but the drift of an epistle is often essential to a truthful interpretation of a word. A precept, a doctrine, an ordinance depends, it may be, not on a text, nor on its proximate paragraphs, but on the aim of a volume. The root shows what the branch must be. The interpretation of the entire Book of Revelation hinges on the assumed aim of the book at the outset. This principle is as valuable to a preacher as to an exegete. The great theme of anathema in the Epistle to the Romans is not moralism, but ritualism. The scope of the epistle discloses this, and it sharpens the point of a hundred texts against a totally different sin from that which many sermons on those texts assail. Luther and his associates were more biblical in their use of this epistle than many modern divines. They made it teach not only the doctrine of justification by faith, but this doctrine as opposed, not to moralism chiefly, but to reliance for salvation on religious ceremonies. Their sermons on the epistle are just in the line of the Apostle's aim.

4th, A fourth source of the materials of explanations is found in the historical and biographical literature of texts. Facts respecting the character of the writer of a text, events in his history, the place from which he wrote, the time at which he wrote, the immediate occasion of his writing, the place held by him in the biblical canon, the literary qualities of his productions, the character of the persons he addressed, events in their history, the effect of his message upon them, the peculiarities of the age, nation, sect, family, to which they belonged, the eminent contemporaries of both writer and readers, — these and similar materials you recognize as being often the expository setting in

which texts are presented by the pulpit. Every thing vitalizes a text, which, in a natural way, introduces persons into and around it. A group of characters will impress a text on the popular mind, as an illustrated newspaper teaches the people a campaign or a pageant when no grammatical explanation could get a hearing. The biblical writers and characters may sometimes be delivered from the mist in which the fact of their inspiration envelops them in many minds by mentioning some of their secular contemporaries. Can you not imagine some of your more intelligent hearers deriving a gleam of fresh interest in an explanation of a text from the life of Elijah from a notice of the fact that he was contemporaneous with Homer? Or of a text from the writings of St. Paul, from the fact that he was contemporaneous with Seneca?

In the eighth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians St. Paul discusses the point of casuistry respecting the eating of meats offered to idols. What is a merely verbal exegesis of that chapter worth to a popular audience? It is extremely difficult to make such an audience feel that the question there raised by the Apostle had any religious significance. In the handling of that passage the people need to know some of the historic facts of Pagan worship. They need to get a glimpse of the old Greek and Roman private life. They should see that the question of which St. Paul treats was a very practical one to a Roman Christian every time he went into the market to supply his table. They should be told that the question concerned the common social courtesies of Roman life. Not only was it true that meats from the temples were sold in the markets, but Roman banquets were often sacrifices to the gods. Invitations to dine with a friend were

often expressed in language technical to religious worship. Hortensius invites Cicero to a sacrifice to Jupiter: he means that Hortensius desires the pleasure of Cicero's company at dinner. The ritualistic character of private banquets remained in form long after the faith of the cultivated classes in Paganism had collapsed. That which was true in this respect at Rome was equally true at Corinth. The Apostle's casuistry, therefore, entered into the conventional courtesies of life in Corinth and throughout the then civilized world. The question in its principle was world-wide, and perpetual in its bearings. Christian life to-day in Paris and New York needs the discussion of it as much as in Rome and Corinth in St. Paul's time. It is a great thing to establish in the popular convictions this pertinence of the Scriptures to modern wants; and very largely this must be done by the apt use of the historical and biographical literature of texts.

5th, A fifth source of the materials of exposition is found in the comparison of texts with parallel passages of the Scriptures.

(1) One obvious use of this expedient is to define the limits of an interpretation. Many texts are truths in their extremes. Some are metaphors. Some are the boldest of hyperboles. Some, on the face of them, are paradoxes; literally interpreted, they are absurd. Some, in the history of Christian doctrine, have become enslaved to philosophy. Some are loaded with inherited misrepresentations. Some are disputed by balanced authorities. It is a great art to handle these texts wisely before an unlettered audience. The common mind is childlike in its tendency to literalism and its attachment to inherited beliefs. That is a masterly aim from the pulpit which can always evolve the truth to

popular satisfaction without awakening the suspicion that the Bible is explained away.

One of the most effective methods of doing this is to make Scripture interpret Scripture. Explain a metaphor by a literal passage. Offset one extreme by its opposite in biblical speech. Interpret an hyperbole by yoking it with a biblical definition. Read the poetry of the Scriptures by the help of its prose. An abused text disabuse by association with one which speaks for both. A disputed text expound by parallels which are not disputed. The proper limits of interpretation are thus often defined most quickly, and, for the popular satisfaction, most conclusively. It assists the common mind to understand the Third Commandment, — "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children," — if we set over against it the declaration in Ezekiel, "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father." If the text, "God is love," is abused by a humanitarian laxity, we tone up the truth most readily by the contrasted text, "God is a consuming fire." Many texts which are abused by fatalistic interpretations we redeem most securely by alliance of them with such passages as, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." The general drift of parallel passages is the best defense we have against a false interpretation of one or two isolated texts which merely grammatical exegesis can not save from fatalistic teachings, because, grammatically expounded, they do teach fatalism more naturally than any thing else. "No man can come to me except the Father, which hath sent me, draw him," is a text of this kind. If any language interpreted by grammatical exegesis alone can teach fatalism in the matter of salvation, that text teaches it. We save it only by limiting

it by the general drift of the Scriptures as indicated by parallel passages.

(2) Another use of this expedient in expositions is to explain peculiarities of idiom. The New Testament contains Hebraisms. These are often best explained by parallels from the Old Testament. The dialect of prophecy has idioms peculiar to no other type of revelation. The so-called double sense of prophecy is of this character. The use of the word "day" in prophetic idiom is a peculiarity. We gain much, if, by parallel citations, we make it clear that such idioms exist. The interpretation of an idiom comes to light of itself, if we can collect examples of it in groups.

(3) Again: parallels are valuable in explanations, for purposes of illustration. An obscure text may often be best explained by comparison with a plain one teaching the same sentiment. A text declarative of a principle may be explained by a biblical narrative illustrating the principle. Our whole sacrificial theory of the Atonement, so far as it depends on biblical proof, hinges finally on parallels between the apostolic declarations of it and the Mosaic illustrations of it. What those declarations mean depends on what the Mosaic ritual was.

(4) Further: parallels are valuable in explanations as confirmatory arguments. The exposition is precisely the place in which to strengthen an interpretation by reduplication of it from other texts. It was a favorite method with Rev. Albert Barnes to buttress his texts by citations of similar Scriptures. I once heard him preach a sermon of which seven-eighths consisted of biblical passages illustrating and confirming different phases of his text. This expedient is liable to great abuse; but, skillfully employed, it is sometimes all the explanation that a text requires.

6th, A sixth source of the materials of exposition is the application of the philosophy of common sense to exegesis. The intelligibility of language grows out of the roots of philosophy which are in every mind. We bring to the Bible, antecedently to our interpretation of it, the germs of philosophy by which we understand it, if at all. We can not help this. A preacher should understand and appreciate it, if he would commend the Bible to the common mind. The Bible, rightly interpreted, has an almost omnipotent ally in the common sense of common people: falsely interpreted, it has as potent a foe there. This principle is liable to abuse; but, like other abused truths, it must be used to save it from abuse.

(1) In application, and in illustration of the principle, the fact deserves notice that progress in mental science reacts upon the interpretation of the Scriptures. The effect of improvements in mental science upon dogmatic theology is well understood. The creeds of the Church establish it beyond question. The same principle is not always so fully recognized in the relation of mental science to the history of exegesis. It is a truth of great moment to the pulpit, that exegesis has a history which has been open all along the line to the influences of philosophy. Those influences have been less direct upon the history of exegesis than upon the history of creeds, but not a whit less powerful.

For instance, we do not interpret the Scriptures precisely as men did when the dominant schools of philosophy were all tinged with fatalism. We can not, if we would, interpret certain texts as Augustine, or even as Calvin did, without sacrificing much which mental science has established since their day respecting the freedom of the will. The common mind, as well as the

more highly cultivated, will not, if left to itself, interpret the Scriptures now precisely as it did when its own consciousness was overshadowed and repressed by a fatalistic philosophy on the part of its religious teachers. Mind is so related to language, that philology inevitably responds to philosophy. The two periodically salute each other on the march of the ages. We can not interpret certain Scriptures as Turretin did, any more than we can interpret certain other Scriptures as the popes did, who made them teach the Ptolemaic system of astronomy. The freedom of the will has conquered a place in all civilized philosophy; certain doctrines of theology have shaped themselves by the side of it; and these have been stereotyped by certain improved exegeses. This inter-relationship has been entirely legitimate. Truth has responded to truth. Discovery in the one direction has necessitated discovery in the other. True, the principle here involved has been abused. It is a perilous principle because it is so effective. The blade is dangerous because it has so keen an edge. But, with the guards which every vital principle needs when in the possession of a finite and a depraved mind, it is a necessary principle in the interpretation of a book which counts its age by thousands of years, and yet claims to be a revelation of the mind of God.

(2) Further: progress in political science affects our use of the philosophy of common sense in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Our whole modern theory respecting responsibility to the State for religious belief depends on an abandonment of many venerated interpretations of texts. Those interpretations have yielded to common sense. They have not surrendered to grammar and lexicon for, under grammar and lexicon alone,

they are possible still. They have yielded to pressure from without. Common sense quickened by political progress has discovered that those interpretations were false. The Bible does not teach them, and never did.

Do we not, for example, necessarily interpret to-day the language of our Lord, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in," differently from the manner in which those Fathers interpreted it who drew from it most prayerfully, not only their authority, but their duty, to establish the Inquisition? Yet we owe our deliverance from thralldom under that text largely to the Prince of Orange. Do we not inevitably interpret the text, "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft," differently from the manner in which the churchmen of Milton's time interpreted it, when they understood from it that republicanism was blasphemy? De Quincey says that this was once "a jewel of a text; for broomsticks were proved out of it most clearly, and also the atrocity of republican government." Look into Algernon Sidney, or into Locke's controversy with Sir Robert Filmer, or into any books of those days on political principles, and you will find that the Scriptures were so used as to form an absolute bar against human progress. What has wrought the change to modern methods of interpretation? In part, it is the two centuries of progress in the philosophy of civil government, which has reacted upon the Scriptures through the state of mind which men bring with them to the work of interpretation.

The same phenomenon is seen in the history of the biblical argument on slavery. Slavery was unanswerably vindicated from the Bible, so long as we allowed its advocates to bring to the exegesis of the book that philosophy of civil government which had been domi-

nant for a thousand years. It is not yet a hundred and forty years since John Newton, after his conversion, took command of a slave-ship, and held it for four years, praying over his Bible all the while, and verily believing that he had tender communion with God, "especially," as he says with charming stupidity, "on my African voyages." What is it that renders such an anomaly impossible now? It is mainly an intuition brought by the popular mind to the interpretation of the Scriptures. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." Men have discovered the true interpretation of the Bible by the lightning of that intuition to which President Lincoln gave utterance. Yet the power to feel it, and the courage to trust it in its fullness, have been the product, mainly, of the last two hundred years.

These illustrations indicate the broad and varied reach of the principle before us, — that the philosophy of common sense is progressive, and that its progress reacts legitimately upon the discovery of the meaning of the Scriptures. The principle, be it repeated, is a perilous one; but, because it is so, we should recognize it in its uses, to save it from its abuses. We can not bury it by disuse. It is no scholastic monopoly. The popular mind will use it lawlessly, if the pulpit does not teach the people its legitimate use. It is one of those forms of popular conviction which we can not control, unless we accept it cordially. If we force upon the Scriptures interpretations which ignore common sense the popular mind will either create for itself wiser biblical teachers, or will reject the Bible as an authoritative revelation.