

LESSON XII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE XII.

THE EXPLANATION: QUALITIES.

HAVING discussed the topic of truthfulness of interpretation, we may pass more rapidly over several other principles which should regulate the qualities of expository discourse.

2d, The explanation should be such as to develop the meaning of the text in its full force. The signification of a text is one thing; its significance, another. The signification of a text is complete when its words are truthfully interpreted, and its grammatical idea expressed. Its significance is its signification clothed in all that is needful for vividness of impression. Lord Brougham, in laying down rules for constructing the narration in the plea of a lawyer, insists upon that which he terms "picturesque expression." A similar quality is often necessary in the explanation of a text. Purely philological processes, though underlying every thing, may, in many cases, be the least part of the work of exposition. Rhetorical invention must often supplement philology very largely in order to magnify a text to its true proportions.

(1) Picturesque explanations are especially necessary to the interpretation of an ancient volume like the Bible. The Scriptures are ancient, not antiquated. We must see them as we see the heavens, — through a

lens of large magnifying power. We must bring the distant near, must make the ancient fresh. This must be done by the highest finish of art. Do we exaggerate a text by such achievement of art? Not at all, in any legitimate use of it. The telescope does not exaggerate the size and brilliancy of Jupiter in the evening sky. We only approximate the truth, even thus.

(2) Picturesque exposition is necessary, also, to the interpretation of a foreign volume like the Bible. We must read the Bible through a foreign atmosphere. Language, climate, nationality, customs, politics, sciences, almost every thing that can give idiosyncrasies to a book, do give such to the Scriptures. And their idiosyncrasies are not our idiosyncrasies. To us they are more emphatically a foreign volume than the Iliad. Nor, on that account, is the Bible unpractical or unfit. But a multitude of its choicest passages do, for that reason, depend, for their significance to us, upon a reproduction to our vision of those foreign conditions in which they had their origin.

(3) Picturesque explanation is especially necessary to the popular mind. The people need to have done for them in this respect that which a scholar can do for himself. The people can often determine by the force of common sense the philological meaning of a text, when they have neither the learning nor the imaginative invention which are necessary to fill a text with its true significance. The pulpit must modernize and Americanize texts, and thus realize them to a modern and American audience. One of the radical diversities of talents in the ministry concerns this power of picturesque exposition. Some preachers are admirable expository critics: others are expository painters. It is not difficult to foresee from which of the two

classes the great preachers must come. So necessary is some degree of this power of picturesque invention to a versatile eloquence in the pulpit, that we may almost say of preachers what Alison says of historians, — that there never was a truly great one whose talents would not have made him eminent as a painter or a dramatic poet.

Here, in my judgment, is the hinge of the whole question of expository preaching. Its practicability depends on that which, for distinction's sake, may be termed the expository culture in the making of the preacher's own mind. If a preacher must be limited to one intellectual talent for the pulpit, let him pray for this. The preacher who has it in any large degree is always a power in the pulpit. He is always among the men who do not seek places, but whom places seek.

3d, A third quality of the explanation is that it should be such as not to give to a text more than its full force. One of the old divines calls the error of exaggerating exegesis a "bombarding of the text." It may be most happily illustrated by observing several of the immediate causes of it.

(1) One of these is an abuse of textual preaching. A man who always preaches textual sermons will inevitably "bombard" some texts. Many texts otherwise good do not naturally furnish the textual divisions of a good sermon. They are units. You can not divide them, and find your materials of thought in the several clauses, without inventing material which is not in them.

(2) Another cause of exaggerated explanation is unchastened rhetorical painting. An example will illustrate this. On the text, "Hear, ye O mountains, the Lord's controversy," an English preacher indulges in a

prolonged description of the biblical scenery at which the text hints." The word "mountain" is sufficient to reproduce in his fancy the whole picture of the vale of Chamouni. God and man are arrayed in a forensic debate in a vast amphitheater, and the surrounding mountains are summoned as spectators and listeners. The description is so elaborate and minute, that one who has seen the Alps imagines Mont Blanc and the Aiguille Verte bending in attentive silence to hear the argument *pro* and *con* between the infinite and the human disputants. Yet the more vivid the picture to the fancy of the reader, the more positive is the sense of inflation of the text. The text is a brief and solitary hint. Its grandeur consists in that glimpse which flashes for a moment, and is withdrawn. That is all that the text means. In that momentary gleam of sublimity its full force is given. By prolonged expansion it loses force, because the idea will not brook delay. It is like lightning. Fix the lightning in the sky long enough to describe a thunder-storm, and it becomes no more than a streak of yellow paint. So the most sublime and poetic hint of a truth may dwindle to the veriest humdrum of prose, if you attempt to paint it with all its correlatives and auxiliaries. A more chastened taste in rhetorical description would save a preacher from such violence to biblical poetry. This is one of a thousand instances in which the true taste is the inspired taste. You can not improve it.

(3) Another cause of the error before us is the subjection of exegesis to the service of polemic theology. An ancient Calvinistic divine endeavored to prove that the Ten Commandments are all violated by a belief in Arminianism. Arminians make a divinity of man's power, and thus break the First Commandment. They

bow down to this idol of their own creation, and thus break the Second Commandment. They talk of ineffectual grace, and thus take God's name in vain: so they break the Third Commandment. They commit spiritual adultery with their idol, and thus they break the Seventh Commandment. They take away from God the dignity which is his due, and thus they break the Eighth Commandment. They covet their elect neighbor's interest in Christ, and so break the Tenth Commandment. A similar sport is carried on with the whole Decalogue, as if the chief object of the divine conference with Moses on Mount Sinai had been to furnish him with rubbish to fling at Arminians. Such biblical exegesis can not be lifted in point of dignity above the sport of schoolboys.

(4) A similar cause of this error is the perversion of the Scriptures to uninspired political uses. Lord Macaulay relates an instance of the preaching of the Bishop of Ely before the court of King James II. A passage from one of the Chronicles was the text, and it was expounded to this effect: King Solomon represents King James; Adonijah was undoubtedly the forerunner of the Duke of Monmouth; Joab was a Rye-house conspirator; Shimei was a Whig; Abiathar was a Cavalier: and he called special notice to two clauses in the text, one of which, he said, implied that King James was superior to Parliament, and the other, that he alone had command of the militia.

(5) Yet a more inexcusable cause of the error before us is a heedless ignorance of biblical facts. A preacher a few years ago, whose imagination had been cultivated more assiduously than his biblical learning, discoursed upon the scene which took place between David and Abigail on the occasion on which she came

out to meet him for the purpose of moderating his anger against her husband Nabal. The preacher dwelt in glowing terms on the beauty of the Carmelite lady, and described, among other details of the interview, her appearance as she approached David on a richly caparisoned and prancing horse. The preacher himself was noted for his fondness for a good horse, which, in the view of some of his parishioners, exceeded the bounds of clerical dignity; and, as he dwelt with great zest upon the equestrian accomplishments of the beautiful rider, an old lady in the congregation gratified her secret distaste for that feature in her pastor's character by turning to her neighbor, and whispering that the sermon was "very handsome," but she "knew better," for the Bible said that Nabal's wife came out to meet David "on an ass." That horse belonged to the "Miltonic interpretation" of the Old Testament.

(6) Another cause of exaggerated exegesis is an abuse of prophecy. Dr. Arnold says that he has never read a commentary on the prophecies which does not, in some point or other, distort the truth of history to make it fit the prophecy. Yet the pulpit can be in this respect no other than the echo of commentaries. The biblical learning of the pulpit will scarcely ever rise above that of the schools.

(7) Perhaps the most violent cause of the error in question is found in the abuse of the Parables. The pulpit has been slow to learn that many incidents in the Parables teach nothing. They are expletive incidents, thrown in to round out the story. To find in them a profound spiritual sense is uninspired manufacture of thought. Inspiration and bibliolatry are in this respect at antipodes. Bibliolatry digs, awestruck, for the occult sense of words: inspiration is calmly con-

tent with common sense. What shall we say, then, of the following from Bishop Heber? On the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he says that the traveler represents the human race; his leaving Jerusalem symbolizes man's departure from God; Jericho is the synonym of the temptations of this world; the robbers are the devil and his angels; the priest signifies the sacrifices of the patriarchal age; the Levite is the Mosaic law; and the Samaritan is Christ. The bishop's good sense seems to have halted here. He adds, not as the discovery of his own genius, that the two pieces of silver "have been supposed" to signify the two sacraments which are left behind for the consolation of Christians, "till their good Samaritan shall return." Professor Stuart, in remarking upon this specimen of exegesis, used to ask whether "somebody" was not represented by the ass on which the Samaritan rode. Yet Bishop Heber was a sensible man. In the affairs of life he called water water, like the rest of us. Why should words and things in the Scriptures be interpreted and used as men never interpret them in any other book, or in the colloquial intercourse of life?

Such vagaries as these were once regarded as a part of the staple of the pulpit. By the ancient standard of pulpit eloquence the ingenuity of such conceits marked the rank of the preacher. The more original his invention, the more authoritative was his exegesis. The theory was that inspired language, because it was inspired, was an inexhaustible mine of hidden treasures of the fancy, in which every preacher might delve at will. He was the prince of preachers who could invent the interpretation least likely to suggest itself to the common reader or to be supported by his common sense. The struggle for liberty to interpret the Scrip-

tures by the rules of good sense, as men interpret the language of other books, has been long and hard-fought; and it is by no means ended.

4th, A fourth quality of an explanation is that it should be clear. An obscure explanation is a self-contradiction. Several causes of such obscurity deserve mention.

(1) One cause is ignorance of oriental life and of ancient civilization. A preacher can not himself understand certain portions of the Scriptures, if he is not familiar with Eastern and ancient usages. He should be a well-informed man in Asiatic researches. Even when the letter of a text is not misunderstood, the force of it may be lost for the want of culture in the department of general oriental knowledge.

(2) Another cause of obscurity of exposition is the needless use of technical phraseology. Terms technical to exegesis, to theology, to Christian experience, or even to biblical usage, should be employed, if at all, with caution. The Bible itself does not needlessly employ them. Even technicalities which the usage of the pulpit has made common are not always understood; if understood, they are but dimly so. They are like windows of ground glass.

(3) Another occasion of obscurity in the explanation is confusion of philosophical distinctions. It is a truism that the Scriptures are not inspired to teach philosophy. Yet philosophical distinctions underlie all sound exegesis, as they do the interpretation of all language. Such distinctions must often be stated to save a text from contradiction of other texts, or of the necessary beliefs of men. If, therefore, a preacher does not admit such distinctions, if he does not understand them, if they are overborne by his theology, if he dare

not accept them courageously, if he have not the skill to make them clear to others, he may leave such a text more obscure than he found it. The common sense of the people should rather be let alone in its reception of the Scriptures than be muddled by lame philosophizing.

As specimens of such texts, may be named passages respecting dependence and ability; passages respecting the causes of sin, like that concerning the hardening of Pharaoh's heart; passages respecting providence and decrees; passages respecting the power of prayer; and passages respecting inherited depravity. Many such texts involve the whole philosophy of the human will. To explain them truthfully, that philosophy must not be falsified nor ignored. A distinction must often be stated, when it is not expanded. When not stated, it must often be implied in the explanation. The preacher must have it in mind unexpressed. To the audience it is the invisible key. The door does not open unless the key is turned by a cunning hand.

(4) A further cause of obscurity in exposition is the want of naturalness of arrangement. Have you never listened to expositions in which the preacher seemed to touch every thing, and explain nothing? He handled every thing vigorously, it may be, yet nothing so as to leave a definite impression. In such a case the difficulty will often be found to be simply the want of natural order. Events are described, not in their actual, nor in any probable, order of occurrence. Characters are grouped in relations which are not proportional. They remind one of a certain cartoon by Raphael, in which figures of half a ton's weight and some hundreds of pounds of fishes are crowded into a skiff not larger nor more seaworthy than a Swampscott dory. The preacher talks at random. He dances from the great

to the small, from the near to the remote, from the material to the spiritual, from the figurative to the literal, and back again, and forth anew, rambling with no order which seems such to a logical mind. He neglects nothing, yet explains nothing. His work results in a literary kaleidoscope.

5th, A fifth quality of an explanation is that it should, if possible, express positive opinions. A preacher should, if possible, have an opinion of his text for which, as an exegete, he is willing to be responsible. The following particulars are worthy of note on this topic.

(1) By far the major part of the Bible is susceptible of positive interpretation. Passages impracticable to exegesis are comparatively few: not one exists, probably, of vital moment. A preacher will find no very large part of the Bible closed to faithful biblical study. Any thing which is thus closed to him is not, for the time being, a canonical text for his pulpit.

(2) Moreover, expression of unsettled opinions of the meaning of the Scriptures does great injury to the pulpit. The pulpit is the place for a religious teacher. Some degree of authoritative instruction is essential to its power. Hearers have a right to expect defined and settled convictions from one whom they have chosen as their instructor. They do not want dogmatism; but they do demand, and justly, confidence of judgment. A man is not "apt to teach" who does not know what he believes. This is especially true when the meaning of the Scriptures is in question. If the pulpit does not know its own ground here, to the people it will seem to know nothing to the purpose. The well-known principle of all popular oratory is applicable here also, — that the popular faith is powerfully affected by the way

in which a preacher treats the foundation of his opinions. Other things being equal, the man who knows will be heard in preference to the man who only believes. He who believes will be heard in preference to the man who doubts. The Scriptures are the foundation of the pulpit. Texts are its pillars. In exegesis, if in any thing, a preacher needs confident opinions. Unsettled faith there ceases to be faith in any thing else with which a Christian pulpit is concerned. A pulpit skeptical as to the Scriptures becomes a floating island: the popular faith can anchor nothing to it.

(3) A Calvinistic theology, especially, requires positive exegesis on the part of its preachers. It is a strong theology. Say whatever else we may of it, it is an oaken theology. Its gnarled branches must be rooted in a deep and solid soil. Its destiny is to encounter tempests of the moral elements. Its life must be far under ground. No dawdling exegesis can support it; nor can any confidence in it as a system of truth be propagated from a pulpit which does not know whether it finds the system in the Scriptures or not. We must find it in the Scriptures, or nowhere. We must know it to be there, or the people will soon know nothing about it. It could not live beyond one generation in the faith of a people who should be thoroughly possessed of the skeptical spirit respecting its biblical foundations.

(4) The tactics of infidelity demand a positive exegesis in the pulpit. I allude here to the standing charge of infidelity, — that the Bible is not a self-consistent volume. This charge is often very effective with a certain ignorant and indolent type of popular skepticism. It declares that the Bible is an instrument on which any tune can be played. Learned and thoughtful infi

This portion has been left in the text for continuity. However, we must note that Calvinistic Theology is contrary to the plain sense of the Scriptures. It is foreign to biblical theology and especially the doctrine of Free Will as well as the doctrine of the common Salvation offered to all mankind (John 3:16, et al) as well as various other biblical doctrines. Dr. VBK

delity knows better than that; but that is the most facile way of neutralizing the biblical argument of the clergy with an unthinking and unlearned commonalty. The pulpit must rebut the charge, not by loud-mouthed denials, but by acting upon the assumption of its falseness. Preachers, by having positive opinions in biblical interpretation, and by expressing them positively, will bear down the charge. They need not pause to debate it.

(5) Turning, now, to some of the failures of preachers to exhibit a positive biblical faith, I remark that some fail unconsciously by a skeptical mannerism in their expositions. Have you not heard one explain a text with the forms of doubt, when nobody doubts, or can doubt, the truth of the explanation? "If this be the meaning of the Apostle;" "This seems to be the idea of the Prophet;" "Such may be supposed to be the design of the Psalmist;" "Probably our Lord meant to teach,"—these and similar formulæ of doubt are employed when there is no reasonable doubt. Commentators on the passages in question express no doubt. The preacher has no doubts. He speaks from the habit of affected wisdom. His impulse would be to speak of the certainty of death with a codicil of doubt in the case of a long-lived stock. I call this a skeptical mannerism. Contrast it with the robust style of apostolic preaching: "I am persuaded;" "Hereby we know;" "I say the truth in Christ;" "We have the mind of Christ;" "Know ye not?" "I have received of the Lord that which I delivered unto you;" "We use great plainness of speech;" "Great is my boldness of speech;" "The Spirit speaketh expressly;" "We know; we are confident, I say;" "Thus saith the Lord." In such varied and intense forms of speech the

inspired preachers express intense convictions. Theirs is an indubitable message. The Epistles of the New Testament seem as if written under oath.

(6) Failure in point of positiveness of exegesis sometimes results from constitutional timidity of opinion. In some minds original opinions are always the result of a trembling balance of probabilities. Which way the scale preponderates never seems absolutely certain. The opponents of Dr. Arnold used to say of him,—though on what grounds I can not imagine,—that he always woke up in the morning with the conviction that every thing was an open question.

(7) In other cases, the failure arises from an overbearing of the speculative upon the exegetical taste. The history of the religious opinions of some men is almost exclusively a dogmatic history. They have come at their opinions through the avenue of speculation, not through that of exegesis, but substantially to the exclusion of exegesis. Consequently for a long time, perhaps for a lifetime, biblical interpretation is of practically no account in their habit of thinking. Such minds make inefficient exegetes in the pulpit. They are so much bolder as theologians than as exegetes, they speculate so much more confidently than they interpret, they are so much more at home in natural than in revealed theology, and in revealed theology they are so much more fond of its catechetical than of its biblical forms, that, in the interpretation of the Scriptures, they never make the impression of authorities.