

## LESSON XXXIII.

### LECTURE XXXIII.

#### THE CONCLUSION: CAUSES OF WEAKNESS.

2d, THE spiritual experience considered in the preceding lecture may in some degree exist, and yet the applicatory power of sermons may receive a drawback from a second cause; that is, an inordinate estimate of the intellectual, as distinct from the emotive and the executive effects of preaching. The sermons of Bishop Butler are the best of their kind in English literature. As literary models they are standards. One turns to them, sure of finding in them intellectual stimulus and refreshment. Yet they are deficient in a certain quality to which the French pulpit has given a name, — *unction*. What is unction in preaching? It is thought so clothed in emotion as itself to reproduce emotion.

(1) The English temperament, and, to a less extent, our American temperament are not friendly to this quality. That which in legislative debate corresponds to unction in the pulpit would be met with the derisive "Hear, Hear!" in the House of Commons. Unimpassioned intellect talking to intellects as cool as itself is the English ideal of a parliamentary speaker. Among the most orthodox divines of the English Church, accordingly, one often finds an over-growth of the didactic element, replete with common sense, but shrink

ing from close analytic applications of truth to the conscience in the forms of direct appeal.

(2) Any one who is familiar with the literature of the English pulpit, especially in unpublished form, must have observed the fact, also, that an over-estimate of the intellectual processes in preaching does not by any means necessitate the most profound intellectual products in the construction of sermons. On the contrary it may, and in the English pulpit it often does, result in the most lifeless of dead levels as it respects original thinking. The modern Established pulpit of England, abstracting from it perhaps three men, has scarcely a scintillation of originality.

If one may judge from the tone of criticism indulged by the secular press of England, the educated laymen of the Church no longer look there for the power of their clergy. They no longer look to the pulpit as an authority, as the creator of popular opinion, even in matters of religion. They do not hesitate to contrast, in this respect, the present decline of their pulpit with its splendid history. The effective labor of the Established clergy is now in the pastoral routine of the parish, wherever it is felt as a social power. There, I think, a more perfect ideal may be found of a Christian pastor than has ever been generally realized in this country. It lives yet as an inheritance from a past age, when Jeremy Taylor did not think it beneath him to minister to the cottagers of Golden Grove, numbering, probably, seldom, if ever, one hundred souls. Nowhere in Protestant Christendom has a finer conception of a Christian pastor been realized than that of the old parish priest of England. To this day, we all turn, for refreshment in the despided toils of the pastoral office, to George Herbert's "Country Parson."

In this country the fact is a lamentable one, that, in all denominations, pastoral visitation has declined. In many cases, even the visitation of the sick, which, by the rules of the Church of England, is an indispensable and most sacred portion of the pastoral routine, is very inefficiently conducted. The administration of charity to the poor, a most potent auxiliary to pastoral influence, has almost wholly passed out of clerical hands.

(3) This decline of pastoral duty is exerting a debilitating influence on the spiritual power of our pulpits. Among many of the clergy of the Church of England the ancient pastoral spirit is still rife. I have been told, by those who had the means of information on the subject, that rectors and curates, in large numbers, are still found performing pastoral duty with heroic fidelity in the rural districts and the manufacturing towns of England, and in portions of London where no man respectably clothed, except a clergyman, can go with safety without the protection of the police. But these are men who are never heard, or heard of, in the pulpit, outside of their own parish precincts. Speaking in the general, therefore, it is fair to affirm that the power of the English clergy has passed out of the pulpit with no present prospect of revival there.

(4) Quietism of the intellect sometimes takes a form still more objectionable, because more heartless. It is that tyranny of an effeminate taste in the pulpit, which rejects pungent applications of truth to the consciences of hearers, as being incongruous with the wants and prerogatives of refined society. The fidelity of John Knox to Queen Mary is, in the judgment of such a taste, a rudeness which the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and of this country has inherited in the habit of its ministry in individualizing hearers, and adjusting

applications of truth to character. To such an emasculated criticism the pulpit has ceased to be a power of reproof. Religion has become a sentiment. Revivals are germane only to uncultivated zeal. An athletic theology has become only historic. Modern refinement neither craves it, nor needs it. The doctrine of an eternal retribution, with its cognate themes, is out of place in a pulpit which is to address itself to the tastes of gentlemen.

The spirit of this type of clerical character pervades the atmosphere of culture everywhere in large cities. Minds which are braced against it, for the most part, by the inheritance of a robust theology and a zealous pulpit, may still be beguiled into some degree of sympathy with it; and that sympathy, without approving such a spirit, may still tempt a preacher to evade the discomfort, perhaps the peril, of shocking it by an unexpected directness, and an unfashionable fidelity of appeal or of reproof.

3d, Intimately allied with the foregoing, we find a third cause of dilution of the applicatory force of preaching, in a morbid fear of fanaticism. The religious weaknesses are very few which sap the strength of the pulpit more insidiously yet more fatally than this. It is not easy to decide which is the more disastrous to a preacher's power over the consciences of men,—to be a fanatic, or to preach in servile fear of being one. The following points deserve especial mention.

(1) The perils of the large majority of educated preachers are not in the direction of fanaticism, but in that of a servile fear of fanaticism. Culture itself is a breakwater against fanatical surges. Its danger is that of becoming a barrier to the inflow of rational

enthusiasm. History shows that genuine fanatics in the pulpit have been comparatively few,—not so numerous by a vast reckoning as those who have been ferocious denouncers of fanaticism. The weaklings who have succumbed to their dread of an intemperate pulpit by making their own pulpit stupid have been as the stars in multitude.

(2) Every revival of religion which has been extensive and powerful enough to become a landmark in history has found a certain proportion of the clergy in opposition to it, through their fear of fanatical distortions. Good men have been swept, by the current of antipathy to fanaticism, into the ranks of worldly hostility to every “great awakening.” Pulpits have been closed, sometimes barricaded, against the eminent instruments of the awakening, as were many metropolitan pulpits of this country against Whitefield. Sermons by the thousands have been palsied in their applicatory force by the shock of recoil from fanatic vagaries. They have lost applicatory invention, and become stilted. The men who have preached them have fallen into professional routine. They have sunk under the disease, which, above all others, is most fatal to a regenerate ministry. The phenomenon is not infrequent, that the very men who have been instrumental in awakening the popular mind in a revival have become the most inveterate opposers of the movement which they originated. The beginning and the ending of a man’s ministry have often been in sad contrast to each other in their spiritual affinities.

(3) The most destructive disease of the ministry, to which I allude, is satisfaction with other successes than those of saving souls, and building up a sanctified church. Nothing else equals this in its power to under

mine an evangelical pulpit. Let a preacher content himself with literary success, in writing and publishing sermons which may become standards of literary taste; or with social success, in building up a church, which, by its culture, its numbers, its wealth, becomes a social power, an attraction to the *élite* of a metropolitan community; or with conservative success, in holding fast an ancient creed or a venerable liturgy, building up a church which is anchored safely in a harbor whose coast bristles with polemic defenses; or with even that kind of missionary success which expresses itself in heavy pecuniary contributions to the support of missionary boards whose names have become an honor in the commercial world,—I say, let a pastor be content with such incidental and exterior successes as these, while no proportionate results are seen in the direct business of saving souls, and building up in them and by them the temple of the living God, and his ministry, in an eternal estimate of its value, may be a dead failure. The soundest historic orthodoxy may be preached in that pulpit; numbers may throng those pews; wealth may flow from them like water, as if at God's bidding: yet, to the look of ministering angels, that church may be but a wretched burlesque of what it seems to be to an admiring world. The world of sin and misery around it may feel its existence as little as the solid globe feels concussion with a peach-blossom. Yet this is sometimes the sequence of a morbid antipathy to fanaticism in a fashionable pulpit.

(4) Probably one of the most notable examples of a really powerful mind which was often thus crippled in the pulpit by its fear of fanaticism was Dr. Robert South. A man of more brawny force of intellect never stood in an English pulpit. He has scarcely had

his equal in command of that Saxon English which gives to speech power over the masses of his countrymen. In his delineation of the weak points of human nature he was the peer of Shakespeare. He deserves to rank among the most racy of English satirists. His casuistical sermons indicate a marvelous insight into human motives. He adhered stoutly to the Genevan theology, — a theology which has always held sway in England when the pulpit has been eminent among the practical forces of the age. To the court of the second Charles he might have been what John Knox was to that of Queen Mary. He was courage incarnate. He read prayers at Westminster on the day of the execution of Charles the First, praying for his Majesty by name. He had the intellectual resources and the temperament of a reformer at his command, at a time when England ran wild in its re-action from the rule of the Commonwealth, and needed just such a mind as his at the head of the English pulpit to stay the torrent of corruption which was flooding the Church.

Yet, with this singular adaptation of resources to opportunity, he missed it as fatally as if he had been imbecile. The sermons on which his fame as a preacher chiefly rests breathe scarcely a hint of apostolic appreciation of the crisis in which he acted. Indeed, some of them hardly suggest the possibility of their having been instrumental in the salvation of souls. Why? It is not for the want of sound evangelical themes from pungent biblical texts. Some of them are among the imperial themes, such as President Edwards would have used in the "Great Awakening." It is not for the want of practicality of aim in his discussions. Many of them are replete with application to real life as he read it. What is it, then, that

takes religious life out of so many of his sermons, and gives them the title which modern criticism has applied to them, of "week-day sermons"? Why are they read now as standards of literature, rather than of the evangelical life of the pulpit? Robert South was for more than fifty years contemporary with Richard Baxter. Why did South leave for posterity the sermon against Extemporaneous Prayer, and the sermon in Memory of Charles the First, the "Royal martyr of blessed memory," while Baxter left the "Saints' Rest" and the "Call to the Unconverted"?

I answer, South was corroded by his enmity to Puritan fanaticism. His pulpit was eaten through by that dry-rot. South the preacher shriveled into South the courtier. The prince of preachers became the most servile of courtiers, whenever he stood face to face with the reformatory spirit of the age. That spirit saluted him, and gave him his great opportunity; and he rebuffed it with ridicule and invective. Thenceforth his eye was closed for ever upon the future of England. While prophets and apostles were moving in the air, he could see no other revelation in the heavens than that Cromwell was "Baal," and Milton a "blind adder." Yet one might cull from the unpublished literature of the pulpit of every generation since his day, discourses, which, with none of his genius, resemble many of his in this, — their incapacity for evangelical uses, occasioned by their recoil from evangelical fanaticism. Dr. South heads the list of a class of preachers, of which every age has its representatives.

4th, To the causes which have now been named as tending to enervate the applicatory power of preaching, should be added one other, — the cherishing of theological theories which are unfriendly to rational uses of truth.



(1) Varieties in theological opinion may, in one aspect of them, be classified as those of a theology which can, and those of a theology which can not, be preached. That is to say, those of the latter class can not be rationally *used* for the practical purposes of the pulpit. May we not now regard it as a fact well understood among intelligent students in theology, that there are dogmas which have a place in historic creeds, which earnest men are constrained to abandon or to suspend when they enter the pulpit? We find such dogmas in the creeds, ancient and modern. They come to us sustained by traditionary reverence. They are still taught in theological schools. In systems of divinity they can be made plausible. In a word, in every form in which theology is shaped, aloof from the living world, they may live, they do live. But, in contact with real life, they fade out of a man's faith. For practical uses they are forgotten. They do not constitute a working theology, and they never did. They were monastic or academic in their origin. Christianity as a living faith has buoyed them up, and kept itself afloat in spite of them. They have never caught a breath of spontaneous favor from the popular heart, and they never can do so.

A preacher therefore finds them to be encumbrances upon the working power of the pulpit. He must apply them to humanity in the abstract, not to men and women as he finds them. Least of all can he reduce them to such simple forms that he can preach them to an intelligent child. A catechism which contains them falls into disuse in Sabbath schools. Reverend councils and assemblies endeavor to resuscitate it by ponderous resolutions and letters of advice; but it can not compete with a rollicking song-book.

(2) A working theology in the pulpit must possess three elements, — freedom from contradictions to itself, consonance with the necessary intuitions of the human mind, and harmony with the Scriptures as a whole, and as the unlettered mind reads them. Doctrines which will not bear these tests of truth, no man can use effectively in preaching. A theology which is pervaded by the spirit of such dogmas, or which is founded on them as a philosophical basis, is so far enfeebled as a practical force, whatever other valuable truths it may contain, or with whatever skill in dialectics it may be defended. The entire applicatory significance of the gospel must be impaired, so far as it is loaded with these impracticable weights, even though they are kept out of sight.

Medical science has invented an instrument by which, when grasped in the hand of one who is sinking under partial paralysis, may be measured the exact decline of nervous force throughout the system. Such a dynamometer is the pulpit, when held in the grasp of an impracticable theology. Just in proportion to the authority of that theology in the pulpit does the pulpit work nervelessly, even to the extent, it may be, of paralytic debility.

(3) As examples of this refractory theology, the following well-known dogmas deserve specification; namely, the theory of a limited Atonement; the theory of the imputation of Adam's sin, as a test of character and a ground of retribution, to his posterity; the consequent theory of sin as constitutional guilt; the inevitable inference from this of a sinner's inability to obey the commands of God; the theory of the untrustworthiness of the human reason in matters of religion; the inevitable inference from this, that reason and faith

conflict, and that in the conflict reason must of course give way; the theory that election to salvation is, as President Edwards repeatedly represents it, the "arbitrary" will of God; whatever Edwards may have meant by this, multitudes of his disciples have meant by it just what it seems to mean to the popular mind, and so they have been understood in their pulpits; the cognate theory of the intrinsic unfitness of truth to move an unregenerate heart otherwise than to develop and consolidate its depravity; the theory that it is not the secret purpose of God to save more than a fragment of the human race; the consequent conception of Christianity, as being an elective system to the few, and simply a detective system to the many, — being to these only a test of that depraved character, which it brings to light and develops to the full in fitness for eternal retribution: this I understand to have been the gist of the theory held by the late Rev. Dr. Lord of Hanover, and in which he has had a respectable following.

(4) We are not now concerned with the truth or falsehood of these theories. Much may be said in the defense of every one of them. They have commanded the theoretic trust of able and godly men. I have no heart to speak with disrespect of any thing which such men have revered. More, even, than this may be conceded to them: we may admit the truth of the whole of them, and yet the oratorical objection to them now before us will not be invalidated.

(5) The point I wish to emphasize is that these theories are not rational elements of persuasion in preaching. If we wish to persuade men to their salvation, we must find other materials than these to do it with. More than this, these doctrines, if held in the pulpit, must be held in silence. They must be kept

out of sight. True or false, it makes no difference. Suasive power is not in these doctrines; and they can not, by any rational process of speech, be galvanized into resources of persuasion to any rational being who can be induced to accept them intelligently.

These dogmas, therefore, are alien to the design of preaching, hostile to a preacher's mission, discouraging to a preacher's hopes, withering to all rational zeal in his work; and they build a firmament of brass to his prayers. Omnipotence, by making these doctrines true, could not change their bearing upon the moral nature of man, without first re-creating that nature, and making the human race something other than it is. The gospel, as a system of moral forces applicable to mankind as it is, ceases to exist, so soon as these theories concerning it receive the divine sanction. It is degraded into an arbitrary attempt to fit things into an arbitrary system, by an arbitrary expedient in which a reasoning being can see no sense, and for which he can discover no use. A more hopeless spot in this universe, outside of the world of retribution, you can not then find, than a Christian pulpit.

(6) Two inquiries are suggested here, in opposition to the view advanced. I admit that the points which they express are fairly taken, in the way of objection, and they deserve an answer. One is the inquiry, "Are not the perils here indicated peculiar to a theological extreme; and are not equal perils incident to the opposite extreme of dogmatic belief?" I answer, most certainly this is true. If my object, at present, were to teach the true proportions of theologic science, I should mark those perils as earnestly as these, and should characterize them as severely. But my province is not to teach theology as such, but only the homiletic

forms and uses of it. The dangers incident to the theological extreme opposite to that which I have defined do not imperil, as that does, the existence of the pulpit as a power of persuasion. If I exaggerate theologic truth on the humanitarian side of it, and distend it in the line of free agency, till it becomes a system of distortions, I imperil the pulpit in other respects, but not in this,—of crowding out of it rational uses of truth in application to free moral beings, such as all men feel themselves to be. Those uses, and a prepossession for them, and an undue, even a suicidal dependence upon them for the work of the pulpit, are germane to the very errors of an extremist in that direction.

But the misfortune of these other distortions which I have specified is that they cut the pulpit loose from strictly rational uses of any thing in preaching. They do not belong to a moral system at all. Under the gloom of such theories, hearers are not proper subjects of the appliances of persuasion. Persuasion, how? Persuasion by what? Persuasion to what? Nothing in the system gives intelligible answer. Man is no longer a moral being, in God's image, susceptible to right motive, capable of holy choice. Under the dead-weight of such a system of government,—I can not call it "moral" government,—men are no more proper subjects of right influence by the instrumentality of preaching than so many oak-trees.

Worse than this even is their condition; and more hopeless is the mission of a preacher to such a world. For having lost by divine decree, and through inherited depravity, all susceptibility to truth as a regenerating and sanctifying power, and yet retaining susceptibility to truth as an aggravating and depraving power, men are by nature the kindred of devils in their moral con-

stitution. The only possible effect of preaching is to make them devils in the end, in their voluntary choices. The only ripened, full-grown character which they are capable of forming is that of matured and full-grown depravity. If the *animus* of such a theology were to control the pulpit self-consistently, so as to make it a unit in its theologic aim, and true to itself in its applications, the pulpit would become the most fearful of retributive engines in intensifying human guilt, and reduplicating human woe. For all redemptive working, it would be like an organ in which the motor nerve is paralyzed.

The other of the two inquiries by which the views I have advanced are fairly met is this, Have not some preachers been successful, who have held all or some of these alleged distortions in theology? Were not Augustine, Turretin, Calvin, Knox, successful preachers? Yet were they not necessitarians in their philosophy? Are not some preachers now infected with these theologic errors who still are wise in winning men to Christ? In view of this inquiry, several facts deserve consideration, which will be discussed in the next lecture.