

LECTURE XVII.

THE PROFESSIONAL VALUE OF BIBLICAL MODELS TO A PREACHER.

THE claims of biblical study upon a pastor would be but incompletely treated, if no mention were made of its direct professional service. No other single principle of success in the work of the pulpit surpasses this, of its dependence on the models of the Bible as guides to both the theory and practice of preaching.

Every careful student of theology discovers the distinction between truth as it appears in uninspired forms of statement, and the same truth as it appears in the biblical forms. It is not chiefly the forms which attract us in the Scriptures: it is the truth itself, qualified and assisted by the relations in which it is uttered, by its antecedents and consequents in the biblical collocation of materials, by the objects for which it is spoken, by the illustrative elements by which it is pictured, by the frequency with which it is repeated, by the atmosphere which is thrown around it by the religious feeling of the writer, and by the moral authority which it derives from the reader's faith in its inspiration. These often change, by refraction, the perspective in which the truth is seen. It is a vast variety of such things which makes truth appear truthful in the biblical conception and statement of it. It

puts on a different look when taken out of the locality in which inspiration has adjusted it to its inspired purpose. In a word, truth in the Scriptures seems to have been *lived*, not said only. A soul breathes in it which speaks as never man spake. The same qualities in the biblical representations of truth which give to an unlettered reader a spiritual quickening give to a preacher a kind of culture which is a powerful auxiliary to his intellectual preparation for professional service. No man needs that culture more.

For the sake of definiteness of conception on this topic, let us follow it in an *excursus* from the main subject upon the contrast between the ultimate impression of certain truths in the biblical teaching, and that of the same truths in the forms of science and in a certain class of sermons.

Our systems of theology do an invaluable service to a preacher. No man can preach the Bible truthfully, who does not preach it with fidelity to a system of truth which pervades it. If we preach it in methods which are reckless of an underlying system, we are sure to derive from it extremes of truth which are not truthful. The best biblical preaching, therefore, is the best theological preaching. The contemptuous treatment of dogmatic theology, sometimes heard from men of pettifogging scholarship, does not deserve refutation. Still our theological systems, as represented in the great historic creeds, are all of them polemic in their origin. They have a belligerent look; they are skeletons in coats of mail. They have been formed in times when some one truth, or class of truths, was believed to be in peril: they have, therefore, an outlook in some directions more eager and defiant than in others. The

majority of them are compromises, in which contending parties placed each its own construction upon ambiguous language. Therefore, to a later age, they often bear the look of contradiction.

This is specially noticeable in the drift of our most scholarly confessions upon doctrines which involve the freedom of the human will. On this subject, truth has been of slow and toilsome growth. She has crept and limped up the great highway of human opinion. "With a great sum" have we "obtained this freedom." Pagan theology everywhere has been saturated to the point of stupor with fatalism. The early Christian thought was drugged with the same poison. The *clear* enunciation of the liberty of the human will, and of the theological corollaries from it, has been, in the main, the product of the Christian thinking of the last two hundred years. We owe it largely to the political and civil history of the Netherlands.

Many of the historic creeds of Christendom, therefore, are woefully disproportioned on this class of doctrines. In some of them, these doctrines are set over against their related truths in language which gives to both classes the look of contradictions. They are stated on the principle of the Duke of Wellington, that "the way to solve contradictions is to affirm both sides stoutly." But more frequently these correlated truths are so stated as to depress the fact of human freedom. Divine sovereignty is emphasized; human responsibility is mumbled. The doctrine of decrees is thundered; that of man's ability is whispered. In all that renders God august and terrible the sound is the blast of a trumpet; in all that should quicken man's consciousness of moral dignity and duty the voice is but the echo of an echo.

As monuments of historic theology, the great creeds of the church are all the more valuable for being just what they are. They mark the struggling faith of believers from theologic infancy upward. We study them with much of the same interest with which one would study the Pinakothek and Glyptothek of Munich, in which is represented the complete history of painting and sculpture. It is no strange thing that they are often illogical, and very far from self-consistent. This is inevitable in the structure of any document which must express the convictions of many independent minds. Macaulay says that "some of the most useful political instruments in the world are among the most illogical compositions ever penned." The same is true of some religious creeds. It grows out of the nature of compromise, in which, from the necessities of the case, the creeds of historic importance have been framed. Compromise of great and sincere beliefs borders hard on contradiction. All honor, then, to these monumental structures of our faith. They have done for the church all that they were ever meant to do.

But who of us have not been sensible of a more powerful *educating* force emanating from the same truths, as they are expressed for a moral purpose, in their biblical forms? It seems as if the human mind, in direct converse with the thought of the Infinite Mind, can not obtain its most formative conceptions of truth, except through the medium of moral sensibilities and a moral aim. Hence it is that we experience such a supreme educating power in the writings of the Hebrew seers, and of the apostles, and in the discourses of our Lord.

Are we not sensible often that a doctrine of our faith in even a masterly theologic treatise is a different thing

from the same doctrine in the Bible? It makes a different impression. It may be stated with such refined analysis and with such exactest choice of speech, and set in the frame of a system so symmetrical, that you feel unable to add to it or subtract from it as a theological formula; yet, in the whole treatise built upon it, it has a different ring from that given by the apostles with the same instrument. It leaves a different resonance in the ear. It starts a different quivering of the sensibilities.

Sermons are sometimes constructed after the model of scientific theological treatises, and therefore exhibit the same contrast with biblical teachings. Have you not listened to discourses on eternal punishment, to the theory of which you could not urge valid objection, but which produced a totally different impression from that of the blended sternness and benignity of the teachings of our Lord? Where do the Scriptures authorize such a final impression of the doctrine as that of President Edwards's sermon on the text, "Their feet shall slide in due time"? Who ever derived from the Bible such merciless conceptions on the subject, couched in such relentless forms of statement, as are found in some of the sermons of Mr. Spurgeon?

Have you not heard discourses on the sovereignty of God, and responsibility of man, not a paragraph of which you would erase as in itself untrue, which yet left an impression unlike that of the ninth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, interlined with the eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel? Who ever received from the Bible the idea which is embossed on so many brazen sermons, that God's sovereignty is sheer will, almighty will asserting its almightiness? and, on the other hand,

that human freedom is an omnipotence of will which God is impotent to control? Where in the Scriptures is the thought ever uttered or painted, even in the wildness of Oriental hyperbole, which was declared by one of our American preachers, that, "in the repentance of a sinner, man is the giant, and God is but an infant"?

Have you never listened to preaching on the doctrine of the atonement, to which you could not object that any single statement was untrue, but which still you felt to be, in its ultimate impression, out of sympathy with the Epistle to the Hebrews? Who ever received from the scriptural imagery of Christ's relation to the Father in the work of atonement, that conception of the Father's vengeance which Dr. Watts has versified in a stanza, which, if it had been sung of the Greek Nemesis, would have surpassed any equal number of lines in Homer?—

"Rich were the drops of Jesus' blood
Which calmed his frowning face,
Which sprinkled o'er the burning throne,
And turned the wrath to grace."

Our inherited type of preaching on the doctrine of sin is unscriptural in this respect, that it starts with the idea of the mercilessness of a holy God. It assumes that forgiveness is not the original and spontaneous action of the Divine Mind. Such is the nature of sin, that the primary notion must be, in a holy mind, that it can not be forgiven. This is the idea which is wrought into the most profound discussions of Pagan theology. It is the very life of the Greek idea of fate. It was the finality of the theology of Socrates. The same conception pervades much of the later literature

of the world. Turn to one of its latest and most original productions, — Hawthorne's "Marble Faun." You find this notion of the implacableness of innocence towards the guilty in his appalling picture of the relations of Hilda and Miriam. Hilda the pure, and Miriam the fallen — an impassable gulf yawns between them, which eternity can never bridge over. The fallen one stands doomed to an "infinite, shivering solitude," in which she can not come "close enough" even "to human beings to be warmed by them." "Standing on the utmost verge of that dark chasm, she might stretch out her hand, and never clasp a hand of theirs. She might strive to call out, 'Help, friends, help!' but, as with dreamers when they shout, her voice would perish inaudibly in the remoteness that seemed such a little way."

This notion has often congealed the heart of the pulpit. Therefore, in preaching even on the doctrine of the atonement, we have failed to represent the spontaneousness of the love of God as the Scriptures do. We have fettered it with limitations. We have qualified it by elections. We have obscured it by figures of bargain and sale. We have counted the elect as if there were danger that too many souls should be ransomed by the price paid. The inevitable impression on the common mind has been, that the love of God in redemption acts under repression, and with divided or wavering purpose. All this is just what the Scriptures do *not* teach in their expression of the love of God in the atoning work. There all is free and whole-souled. The way to the heart of God is wide open. There is no conflict in the mind of Godhead. No antagonism of nature or of purpose separates God from Christ.

God gives his Son; Christ gives himself: the purpose of redeeming love is original with both. God, above all other beings in the universe, is a sinner's friend; the whole Godhead is a sinner's friend. A preacher comes into a different atmosphere from that of the religion of nature, as soon as his mind takes in the unbroken strain of the responses which the Scriptures make to the inquiry "What must I do to be saved?"

So of any doctrine which has been hotly contested in the schools. How few discussions of such a doctrine are there, which a Christian heart, when in the most filial communion with God, and reverent fellowship with Christ, feels to be honestly and artlessly truthful to the Scriptures as a whole, breathing the same spirit, and leaving the same impression, without abatement and without hyperbole!

You will recognize, therefore, the pertinence of the injunction, that a preacher needs to imbibe the spirit of the biblical models as an addition to, yet distinct from, that of the theologic models. I say, "an addition to" these, not in abrogation of them; because theologic science must do, and has magnificently done, a work *for* the pulpit which can not be brought *into* the pulpit. We must study philosophic truth in its exactness for the purpose of concinnity of faith, and then we must come back and drink in the spirit of the same truth in its inspired artlessness of form for the purposes of preaching.

Some striking information to the point here is found in an account, published a few years ago, of the religious state of Sweden. It appears that it was a feature in the organic law of Sweden, that the schools should teach all the youth of the kingdom the Lutheran Cate-

chism: as the Swedish pastors termed it, the schools should "teach religion" to the children. Accordingly, every Swedish child of suitable age was "taught religion" by catechetical drill supervised by the pastor of his parish. Probably there was not then, if there is now, another country on the globe where this duty was so scrupulously attended to as there. But, at the time referred to, the complaint was universal among the clergy and the thoughtful laity of Sweden, that the vitality of the old faith was dying out. In hundreds of parishes the youth droned through the Catechism as a necessity to their civil standing in after-life; but the ancient faith no longer breathed in the ancient form.

Side by side with this admirably compacted system of catechetical routine, there sprang up an obscure sect of "Lascari," as they were termed; that is, "readers," as I understand the title. They resembled in spirit the Methodists of England. They derived their name from the fact that their religious teachers, with no ecclesiastical *status* recognized by either Church or State, were simply readers of the Bible. They erected plain meeting-houses, like barns, to evade the laws of the realm against the unlicensed erection of churches. The people forsook the old temples of their fathers, and flocked in thousands to the cheerless barns of the Lascari, to hear the Bible read. The clergy stood upon their dignity. They scolded the people from their pulpits. The entire respectability of the kingdom frowned upon the innovation. But still the people thronged the meetings of the "Readers." Again they repeated the old story of Christian reform,—that, as Dr. Chalmers said, Christianity is *not* a power of respectability only, but a power of regeneration.

Awakened men and women from far and near came together to hear the voice which had raised them as from the dead. Some of them journeyed from ten to sixty miles for the purpose. Many gave evidence of spiritual conversion. The traveler who published the account in this country expressed the opinion that the hope of Protestantism in Sweden was no longer in the old church of Gustavus Adolphus: it was in the despised Lascari.

The providence of God teaches a significant lesson to the pulpit by such a social phenomenon as this. It is, that to the popular heart there is no other preaching like that which is baptized in the fountains of inspired thought and feeling. The pulpit which is built upon the soundest platform of systematic divinity, and that *only*, goes down before the living man who invites men to listen to the words of God. It is true no man can build up in the popular faith the best ideal of Christian truth, who has not mastered systematic theology in its most scholarly forms; but it is equally true that no man can build that ideal who has studied truth in those forms alone.

This view is confirmed by an acknowledgment which Orestes A. Brownson has made respecting the *catena* of Roman-Catholic theologians. He says, "The fathers studied and expounded the Scriptures, and they were the strong men, the great men, the heroes of their times. The mediæval doctors studied, systematized, and epitomized the fathers; and they, though still great, fell below those who were formed by the study of the Scriptures themselves. The theologians followed, and gave compendiums of the doctors, and fell still lower. Modern professors content themselves with

giving compendiums of the compendiums given by the theologians, and have fallen as low as possible without falling into nothing, and disappearing in the inane."

This would be a libel, if affirmed of the brilliant succession of Protestant scholars who have represented the progressive theological thought of the last three centuries. It is specially untrue of those of our own country. But of the Romish schools it expresses, from one who may be accepted as an authority, the tendency to a deterioration of culture which will be always found where theological science has been divorced from a study of the Scriptures.

This tendency is sometimes witnessed in the pulpit, when dogmatic theology is allowed to monopolize its ministrations. Then logic tyrannizes over rhetoric. Theological system overbears homiletic variety and the adaptations of suasive speech. In confirmation of this, it deserves to be noted that the most cumbrous and least profitable kind of *serial* preaching, unless it be executed by a man of rare power in popularizing abstract thought, is that in which a series of sermons is founded upon the church creed. That was a deserved rebuke which a pastor in Boston once received, when, in the midst of such a series on the Catechism, a delegation from his sabbath school waited upon him to inform him that a religious awakening was in progress in the Bible classes, and that they needed other instruction than that which he was giving them; not other truths, but in other and more versatile forms.

This fact suggests another, that no other proportions of truth tally so well with the purest type of revivals of religion as the proportions found in the Scriptures. I can not but regard some kind of severance of truth

from the biblical ways of putting it as one reason of the pathological affections which have brought revivals into discredit among thinking men. I refer to the whole class of phenomena which medical science would classify under the titles of hysteria and catalepsy. An epidemic of them at the West, many years ago, received the popular name of "the jerks." Something resembling St. Vitus's dance attacked perfectly able-bodied men under the tempestuous preaching of the time. Athletic men from the backwoods of Kentucky, who sought the Presbyterian camp-meetings with angry challenge of "the jerks," were thrown to the ground before the sermon was half finished, and wallowed there till they were borne out into the air, swearing that "the devil was in it." Probably in some sense he was. But no such phenomena are recorded as attending apostolic preaching, except those which are expressly ascribed to miraculous gifts. Biblical truth in biblical proportions tends always to a certain equipoise of effects. The whole man is reached by it. It produces a quickening of so many and such varied sensibilities, that each balances another. Opposites limit and regulate each other. Paroxysmal excitement is impossible. "*Peace I leave with you*" is the message which symbolizes the spiritual economy in the working of biblical truth in its biblical adjustments.

To the views thus far presented, I would add, if the time would permit, a more extended notice of one other topic which I will now name, with only a synopsis of the train of thought which it suggests. It is that the study of the Bible as a literary classic has a tendency to blend scholarship with Christian sensibility in such proportions as to render each a help to the other in the

growth of character. The prominent thoughts on this topic are the following ; viz., the difficulty which Christian scholars often experience in harmonizing in their own character accomplished scholarship and religious faith ; the fact that the ministry contains men of religious ardor but imperfectly regulated by scholarly discipline ; the opposite fact, that it contains also men of superior scholarship, who sympathize but feebly with the popular developments of religious fervor ; the fact that historically these two elements of character are actively combined in the most vigorous periods in the life of the church, and signally so in the most useful men ; the fact that disaster always follows any marked and prolonged disproportion between them in the administration of the pulpit ; the fact that no other clerical study is so healthfully regulative in this respect as that of the literary models of the Scriptures ; and the fact that a biblical discipline of piety thus blended with scholarly culture will work its own way to the most essential principles of art in public speech.