

Men and Books  
or  
Studies in Homiletics

by  
Austin Phelps



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# MEN AND BOOKS

OR

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## STUDIES IN HOMILETICS

*LECTURES INTRODUCTORY TO  
THE THEORY OF PREACHING*

BY

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## PREFACE.

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A THOROUGHLY trained preacher is first a man, at home among men: he is then a scholar, at home in libraries. No other profession equals that of the pulpit in its power to absorb and appropriate to its own uses the world of real life in the present and the world of the past as it lives in books. A very essential part of a preacher's culture, therefore, concerns his use of these two resources of professional power. The large majority of the topics commonly treated by professors of homiletics as *miscellanies* will be found to arrange themselves naturally in these two lines of discussion. By so arranging them, I have sought to gain the concentration of unity and the cumulation of order.

Like the Lectures on "The Theory of Preaching," in a former volume, these discussions retain the form and style of the lecture-room in which they were delivered, in response to the practical inquiries of students on the eve of entrance upon their life's work. Almost no other changes have been made than those which were necessary in the mechanical revision for the press.

It should be observed, respecting that portion of this work which discusses the study of books, that its design is limited. I have by no means attempted to give an analysis of English

literature, nor to plan the studies of men of literary leisure, nor to advise respecting the reading of miscellaneous classes, as President Porter has so usefully done in his work on "Books and Reading." My aim is to answer the inquiries of young pastors whose collegiate training has created literary aspirations which ought to be perpetuated in the life-long labors of their profession.

It will be objected, to some of the counsel given in these pages, that to many young preachers it is impracticable. This objection is treated at length near the close of the volume. But at present this should be said of it: that any plan of effort or of study auxiliary to the work of the pulpit, to be largely useful, must, from the nature of the case, be largely *ideal* in its character. One of its chief virtues must be its power to sustain the aspirations of a preacher, rather than to measure his achievements. Diversities of gifts, diversities of culture, diversities of health, and diversities of leisure, must create such diversities of condition among pastors that no two of them can find precisely the same plan practicable to them both.

All that professional criticism can do, therefore, is to present to all, as to one, the true ideal of the labor auxiliary to homiletic culture, and trust to the good sense of each to decide for himself how far, and with what eclectic skill, it is practicable to him. It is worth much to have a good ideal of any thing that is worth doing. The grandest lives are but approaches to grand ideals. The very sight of a good library, though just now unused, is a stimulus and a cheer to a missionary in the backwoods. So an ideal of a life's work is valuable as a suggestion of effort, perhaps for ever

impracticable in the full, yet for ever susceptible of approximation. Such an ideal does much for a youthful pastor, if it marks out the line of ascent on which he will gain the loftiest altitude and the broadest vision, with the least waste of mental and moral forces.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS.

---

### LECTURE I.

	PAGE
The Original Source of Oratorical Culture. — A Preacher's Study of his Own Mind. — Study of Other Men; of Individuals; of Secular Assemblies; of Religious Awakenings . . . . .	1

### LECTURE II.

Study of Men, continued. — The Factitious Reverence for Books. — The Popular Idea of a Clergyman. — The Clergyman of Literary Fiction. — Clerical Seclusion; its Effects on the Pulpit. — Antipathy to Political Preaching. — Waste in Ministrations of the Pulpit . . . . .	17
--	----

### LECTURE III.

Study of Men, continued. — Study of Eccentric Preachers. — A Negative Ministry. — Preaching in an Age of Excitement. — Literature not constructed for the Masses; Consequent Peril to the Pulpit. — Resemblances between the Pulpit and the Greek Drama. — Popular Revolutions often Independent of the Educated Classes . . . . .	33
--	----

### LECTURE IV.

Study of Men, continued. — Popular Revolutions distorted for the Want of Educated Leadership; the Clergy the Natural Leaders of the Popular Mind. — The Clergy sometimes Ultra-conservative; Effect of a Tardy Leadership. — Consequence of an Exclusive Ministry . . . . .	49
---	----



## LECTURE V.

	PAGE
Study of Men, continued. — Clerical Influence with Educated Classes more largely Moral than Intellectual, Reflexive rather than Direct. — Anomalous Relations often created between the Church and the World . . . . .	67

## LECTURE VI.

Study of Men, concluded. — Practice of Leading Minds in History. — Ancient Theory of Education. — Theory of the Middle Ages. — Modern English Theory. — Individual Examples. — Eminent Writers who decry Oratorical Study . . . . .	83
---	----

## LECTURE VII.

Study of Literature for Clerical Discipline. — Objects of the Study; Discipline, not Accumulation; Discovery of Principles of Effective Speech; Power of Unconscious Use of Principles; Assimilation to the Genius of Great Authors . . . . .	96
---	----

## LECTURE VIII.

Objects of the Study of Literature, continued. — Knowledge of One's Own Adaptations; Necessity of this to the Ministry; Illustrations of the Want of it. — Peril of an Educated Ministry. — Study of Books conducive to Self-appreciation . . . . .	111
---	-----

## LECTURE IX.

Selection of Authors. — Worthless Books. — Universal Scholarship a Fiction. — Impracticable Plans of Reading. — Rebellion against Necessary Limitations. — Controlling Powers in Literature . . . . .	127
---	-----

## LECTURE X.

Study of the Few Controlling Minds, continued. — An Objection considered. — The English Literature Predominant. — Vernacular as compared with Foreign Literature. — Utility of Culture the True Test. — Selfishness in Culture . . . . .	146
--	-----

TABLE OF CONTENTS.

ix

LECTURE XI.

	PAGE
Superiority of the English Literature; the English a Composite Order of Mind; a Literature of Power as distinct from Knowledge; a Christian Literature; a Protestant Literature; a Literature of Constitutional Freedom; a Balanced Literature; a Mature Literature; a Popular Literature; Prolific of Models of Persuasive Speech . . . . .	160

LECTURE XII.

Recognition of an American Literature in our Studies; its Intrinsic Worth in some Departments; an Offshoot of the Literature of England; American Theological Literature Original . . .	177
---	-----

LECTURE XIII.

Choice of Authors regulated in Part by Professional Pursuits; Choice of Authors Comprehensive; Variety not at the Expense of Scholarship; Literary Affectations; Cant in Literature; Breadth Essential to Richness; Autocracy of Authors . . .	192
--	-----

LECTURE XIV.

Breadth of Range in Study, continued; the Clergy in Danger of a Narrow Culture. — Dr. Arnold's Advice to Young Preachers. — Living Speakers as Models; Magnitude of Unwritten Literature; its Representative Character; Powerlessness of the Press to express it; Necessity of the Study of it to True Conceptions of Oral Eloquence; Essay and Speech distinguished . . .	207
--	-----

LECTURE XV.

Study of the Bible as a Literary Model. — The Neglect of the Scriptures by the Taste of Scholars. — Defect in our Systems of Education. — The Bible the Most Ancient Literature Extant; its Representative Relation to the Oriental Mind. — Oriental Races not Effete. — The Bible the Regenerative Power in the Revival of the Oriental Mind. . . . .	224
--	-----

LECTURE XVI.

Study of the Bible as a Literary Classic, continued. — The Bible incorporated into all Living Literature; Spenser; Shakspeare; Milton; Wordsworth; English Hymnology; Forensic Elo-	
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quence.—Debt of Infidelity to the Scriptures.—Intrinsic Superiority of Biblical Models.—Bearing of Inspiration on Literary Merit; in What consists its Literary Superiority? . . . 238

**LECTURE XVII.**

Study of the Scriptures as Classics, concluded.—Professional Value of Biblical Models to a Preacher.—Biblical and Theological Forms of Truth.—Biblical Forms in Religious Awakenings.—Scholarship blended with Religious Feeling in Biblical Study . . . 256

**LECTURE XVIII.**

The Methods of Literary Study by a Pastor.—Preliminaries.—Necessity of Critical Reading; of Philosophical Modes of Reading.—Anomalies in Literature.—Reading with Division of Labor; Essential to Intelligent Study; to Profound Knowledge; to Extent of Learning . . . . . 269

**LECTURE XIX.**

Methods of Study, continued.—Comparisons of Authors.—Comparisons of National Literatures; of Departments; of Literature with Art.—Disclosure of Delicate Qualities.—Relative Excellences.—Special Culture of Weak Points.—Tyranny of Natural Tastes.—Collateral Reading of Biography and History; Illustrated . . . . . 281

**LECTURE XX.**

Methods of Study, continued.—Reading with Practice in Composition; improves the Quality of Study; promotes Originality.—Proportion of Executive Power to Critical Taste.—Methods of connecting Study with Composition.—Imitations of Authors.—Daily Composing prefaced by Daily Study.—Appreciation of Genius associated with Just Estimate of One's Self . . . . 295

**LECTURE XXI.**

The Practicability of Literary Study to a Pastor.—Any Scholarly Plan of Study an Ideal One.—Study must be made Practicable.—Retrenchment of Executive Miscellanies.—Severe Bodily Discipline Essential.—Assisted by Moral Virtues.—Originality of Plans.—Scholastic Ideal alone, not Practicable.—Necessity of Concentration.—Interruptions anticipated . . . . . 309

TABLE OF CONTENTS.

xi

LECTURE XXII.

	PAGE
A Plan of Study of the English Literature. — A Historic Line of Professional Reading. — Collateral Lines pursued as suggested by the Professional Line. — Remote Portions of the Literature read by Departments. — Fragments of Time Utilized. — Light Literature reserved for Periods of Leisure. — The Plan detailed, from A.D. 1350 to A.D. 1850. — Miscellaneous Hints . . .	325

MEN AND BOOKS;  
OR,  
STUDIES IN HOMILETICS.

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LECTURE I.

INTRODUCTION. — STUDY OF MEN; OF A PREACHER'S  
OWN MIND; OF OTHER MEN.

THE first orator in the order of time had nothing to make him an orator but his head and his heart and his study of men. He had no treatises, no models, no objective eloquence in any form, to guide him. He had only human nature to work with as well as to work upon. The instinct of speech he improved into eloquence by experiments upon men as hearers of speech.

Then, when the reflective process began in his mind, and he reasoned out the first crude science of his art, he must have reasoned upon the simple facts of his experience. His primary question was not, What is eloquence in its philosophical germ? or, Has it any such germ? It was, How is it that men are actually moved by speech? What, in fact, persuades men? What has done this as a matter of experiment? Upon that history of eloquence as an experience of living minds,

possibly of but one living mind, must have been laid the first stone of the arch of oratorical science.

But while the first orators, and, following them, the writers,—for speech must have preceded writing,—had only men to study, their productions became to their successors an additional source of oratorical culture. Observe: not an independent, but a supplementary source. It is a source, which, from the necessity of the case, could be valuable only so far as it embodied the results of a knowledge of human nature. Demosthenes, by incorporating into his orations the principles of eloquence derived from the study of men, rendered those orations a source of culture to all subsequent generations. We therefore have a second source of oratorical culture in models of effective writing and speaking.

Observe, that, when we speak of models of effective writing and speaking, we include all successful and permanent literature. The grand test of power in speech is the Napoleonic test of character,—success. The final test of success, from which there is no appeal, is permanence. All literature, be it oral or written, which bears these tests, may be a source of professional discipline to a public speaker. Not merely orations, speeches, sermons, but all written thought which bears the stamp of success, must embody some of the principles of power in the expression of thought by language. In defining the range of it, we do not inquire what authors and speakers have written and spoken according to one standard or another, by the rules of one authority or another, to the taste of one age or another, but simply who have succeeded. We do not ask who have succeeded in the right cause or the wrong, with good

motive or bad motive, by honest purpose or by knavery, but who have succeeded in any cause, with any motive, by any means of *speech*.

Proceeding to apply the view here given to the studies of a preacher, I propose, in this and the succeeding Lectures, to speak of a preacher's STUDY OF MEN and of his STUDY OF BOOKS as sources of oratorical discipline.

I. Upon a preacher's independent study of men the following suggestions deserve remembrance:—

1. Every preacher may obtain much of oratorical culture from attention to the processes of his own mind. The study of men every man may pursue for himself. We have at least the same facilities in this respect that the first orator had. In the study of men a preacher should rank first his own mind. You have in your own selves an original and independent source of rhetorical knowledge. No other can be more so.

(1) In development of this view, let it be observed that every man's experience contains biographical *incidents* suggestive of oratorical principles. Every educated mind which is therefore accustomed to self-inspection has in itself a history of oratorical appliances. You have listened to public speakers; you have heard sermons; you have read successful literature; you know, therefore, what truths have moved your own mind, and in what forms, and in what combinations with other truths. You have learned to distinguish between speakers who instruct your intellect only and those who move your sensibilities. Your memory is full of incidents of success or failure in experiments of speech which other men have made upon yourselves. Have you not unconsciously laid the foundations of your

self-knowledge, in part, in this knowledge of your own susceptibility to persuasive speech?

Here, then, is a general criterion by which to judge of your own appliances to other minds, — a general criterion, I say, because individualities differ in details. Very much spurious composition would collapse if the writer would honestly apply to it the test, “Would this move me? Would these thoughts, thus expressed, satisfy the cravings of my nature? Would this strain of argument convince my intellect, this style of reproof reach my conscience, this method of appeal sway my heart?”

Many a preacher knows that the best of his own sermons can not stand this homely test. The salient incidents in his own mental history, which are always most fresh in his memory, suggest something very unlike his own productions. His experience as a listener, and his practice as a preacher, are founded on different ideals of success. If he were to choose, on the spur of the moment, the preacher to whom he owes, more than to any other, his noblest conception of the power of the pulpit, he would choose the man above all others most unlike himself, and whose sermons, not only in degree of excellence, but in kind and in aim, are most diverse from his own.

(2) Not only do incidents salient in every man's life suggest principles of eloquent speech, but the more profound history of every man's *character* is full of similar suggestions. Every character has a history of changes. They lie deeper than transitory movements of intellect, and awakening of sensibilities. As preachers we have to deal mainly with fundamental changes of character. Our great aim is to produce changes,



some of which are revolutionary. The plow of the pulpit runs deep, if it runs at all to the purpose of the pulpit.

A preacher needs, therefore, to study the history of his own character. He needs wisdom to read it aright. Your own life antecedent to your religious awakening; the causes and the process of that awakening; the unwritten experiences which gather in your memory around the crisis of your conversion, if that crisis disclosed itself to you; and the visible stages in the process of your religious growth thus far, — are most vital resources of that kind of culture which you need as a guiding mind to others through similar experiences. Other changes auxiliary to these are scarcely less important. Changes of opinion, of taste, of mental habit; changes in the proportion of the spiritual to the physical in your nature; changes inevitable to progress from the infancy to the maturity of godly principle within you; any and every change which your self-consciousness marks as fundamental to growth of character, — are resources of knowledge to you respecting means and methods of working, combinations of truth most helpful to success, and the entire furniture of your mind for the work of training characters which are in need of or are undergoing similar changes under your ministrations.

Yet does not the history of the pulpit give evidence of inattention to this kind of personal history, which must lie back of it in the memory of the preacher? We preach too little of and from the work of God within us; too much, perhaps, about our external history, but too little about the principles involved in the deeper processes of spiritual life, which do not disclose themselves in events, nor provide the material for an

anecdote, but are subterranean, and tributary to all growth. Much of the fanaticism of the pulpit would be forestalled, if preachers were more studious of God's method in the training of themselves. As a rule, fanatical preachers were not converted by fanaticism. They are never themselves improved by fanaticism. They know this, if they interpret honestly their own history. A regenerate man preaching from his own regenerate experience could not be a fanatic: he could not so disturb the divine balance of truth. Some short-sighted modes of doing good, some unnatural appeals to the consciences and the feelings of men, much claptrap, egotism, humdrum, animal magnetism, in the pulpit, would be displaced by more profound resources, and more intensely vitalized expedients, if preachers read human nature more adroitly in their own.

Preachers often attempt to influence audiences, not only by isolated arguments, illustrations, appeals, but by prolonged plans of ministerial effort, which they know, when they fairly awaken to the realities of the case, have no root in the underground of their own characters. Revivals of religion are sometimes labored for by expedients which are untrue to the preacher's own history. They are expedients which he knows would, if he had encountered them at a critical period of his life, have caused his own soul to revolt from the truth, to despise the truth, or to stagnate under the truth. He is the very last man, it may be, to have responded favorably to a prophecy of his own sermons.

Have you not yourselves observed the fact in the history of preaching, that ministers who fall into unphilosophical modes of preaching are themselves the most uninterested listeners to such preaching? Preach-

ers are proverbially hard hearers. One reason is, that there is so much in preaching which is unreal to anybody's experience. They who preach claptrap are not edified by claptrap any more than their hearers. Those who preach humdrum are not interested in humdrum when they hear it. They sleep under it more profoundly, if possible, than other men. Seat them as listeners to such preaching, and, if their eyes are open, they are as the fool's eyes, like those of other hearers. A great and live soul, which can furnish its own fire, is required to get aglow under such preaching. The authors of it never do: they never feel even the crackling of thorns under such a pot. Ignatius Loyola might have been converted under such preaching, but never the Rev. Dr. Dunderhead.

The same is true of inordinately intellectual preachers. By this I mean those preachers in whom intellectual enthusiasm exceeds and overpowers religious fervor. Such preachers are not morally moved by the preaching of their peers. They are not religiously edified by extreme profundity, or by imaginative pyrotechnics, or by mystical reveries, in other preachers. The men who move them are probably the plain men who talk right on. The text may move them; the prayer may melt them; the hymn may make them weep: but the immensely intellectual sermon, which is that, and nothing more — they know too well the stuff it is made of.

The phenomenon will sometimes discover itself to you in the experience of the pulpit, that a preacher's professional life and his personal life are at antipodes to each other. He preaches almost any thing, in any way, except the thing, in the way, which the Holy Ghost

has made a living thing and a living way to his own soul. You perceive, then, the fundamental character of the principle, that a preacher should study his hearers in himself. Other things being equal, no other preaching is so effective as the preaching which is rooted in a man's own experience of truth. Such truth he knows. Comparatively speaking, he knows nothing else.

2. Every preacher has also a source of rhetorical culture in the study of other men. Real life everywhere is full of power in speech. Character can scarcely express itself in language other than the dialect of eloquence. Whether it be so denominated in books or not, it is such in fact. Books should be conformed to life, not life to books.

(1) *Individual* character in its rudest forms is power in speech. The market-place, the streets, the fields, the workshops, the counting-rooms, the court-rooms, the schoolhouses, the platforms, the firesides, the steam-boats, the rail-cars, the exchange, every place, every thing, in which men are off their guard, and speak right out what they think and as they feel, with no consciousness of trying either to think or to feel, are teeming with natural eloquence. Books bear no comparison with this eloquence of life. The world could not contain the books which would have been requisite to express this unwritten development of power in oratorical forms of utterance.

You can not observe two men making a bargain without witnessing an example of something which enters into the highest art of persuasion. You can not listen to the words, constructions, intonations, of an angry man, without meeting some of the elements of all earnest oratory. A man chasing his hat in a gale acts

in pantomime a principle which Demosthenes could not safely ignore in striving for the crown. The slang of the street, the dialect of the fore-castle, the lingo of collegians, illustrate principles of style which underlie forms of power in thought and utterance which have lived a thousand years. A woman over the couch of a sick child speaks in words which have roots running down into the original ideal of pathos in all literature. Animated conversation illustrates principles, and takes on forms, which no eloquence of the senate or the pulpit can do without. How often does our wearied criticism of a public speaker express itself in some such inward exclamation as this, "Oh that he would step down from his stilts, and talk as we heard him talk at the tea-table on a certain evening!"

These most common and therefore neglected forms of individual character in daily life are full of the resources of homiletic culture to any one who will take the trouble to observe them for that purpose. At this point is seen one of the vital dependences of the pulpit on pastoral duty. No preacher can afford to be a preacher only, and live in his study alone, were it only for his need of homiletic suggestion coming directly from the homes and the business of his people. To know thoroughly one able man in your parish is the counterpart of a homiletic treatise in teaching you how to preach to all the peers of that man.

(2) The conduct of *secular assemblies* often discloses the working of power in speech. Much wisdom which preachers have occasion for may be learned from the answer to the question, "How do lawyers who gain their cases deal with juries? How do they work differently in addressing a bench of judges?" If it were

possible, I would have every minister of the gospel practice law. Some of our ablest preachers have been subjected to that preliminary discipline, and never without acknowledging their obligations to it through a lifetime.

How are town-meetings governed by a few words from a few plain men? How is it that an educated man sometimes fails in such an assembly, outgeneraled by a farmer or a blacksmith? How is a city mob quelled by a dozen men with no weapons more deadly than a billy? Why are a dozen policemen a match for a hundred desperadoes? The elements of power which explain that phenomenon have their parallels in oratorical forces. The principle which explains, in part, the fact that an army of sixty thousand men keeps in subjection sixty millions of aliens in British India is the same which explains, in part, the coming conversion of the world by a handful of preachers with no auxiliaries to speech but prayer.

Edward Everett could hold in silence an audience of three thousand scholarly minds by an oration which passed at once into the standards of literature; and Charles Sumner could command the most intelligent and independent Senate in the world, not one of whom liked him personally, by a speech which became a thesaurus of learning and a landmark of history. Yet neither of these princely orators could get a hearing of ten minutes from a crowd in the street, if the Hon. Stephen A. Douglas were known to be there to oppose them. What caused these diversities? Anybody who will explain such facts as these truthfully must discover in the process some practical rhetorical wisdom, and that the very last which a preacher can afford to lose.

Are some of these things done by other means than speech, and by foul means in part? Very true. But all successes in real life have their counterparts in speech. Foul means, to be successful, must appeal to elements of human nature which are normal to it. A right appeal to those elements a preacher may make with hope of equal success. The susceptibility of the human mind to such appeals is the basis of all eloquence. The business of real life, therefore, is full of it. The study of men succeeding and failing in that business must be prolific of wisdom to a public speaker. The late Lord Lytton gives advice to a young London author, saying, "Never write a page till you have walked from your room to Temple Bar, mingling with men, and reading the human face." He adds the fact that great poets have, for the most part, passed their lives in cities.

(3) We find also a specially valuable resource of homiletic culture in the study of masses of men *under religious excitement*. Sympathetic religious awakenings are phenomena of life as old as nations: to them is due by far the major proportion of Christian progress. More than half of the history of Christianity in this world would be blotted out if we should erase the record of the great sympathetic waves of religious sensibility which have rolled over communities and nations and races. The modern excitement which we term a revival illustrates only one phase of an experience of which, in kindred forms, history is full.

Revivals are often spoken of as an American product. It is true that American revivals have had peculiarities growing out of the national temperament and history; but in the sense of being in spirit limited to one coun-

try or another, or one nation or age rather than another, they are not American. Revivals are a normal working of human nature moved by supernatural forces. They have never been provincial. All the past is dotted over with them: all the future must be the same. Our hope of the world's conversion is a dream, if religious progress is to be measured by that of the intervals between these great awakenings of the popular heart.

Such awakenings, therefore, are a very vital object of a preacher's study. Generally, sympathetic religious excitements are the result of preaching. Consecutive plans of preaching should contemplate them, and be adjusted to them. Under a wise ministry, blessed of God, they are sure to occur. A pulpit not adjusted to them is like a system of husbandry not planned for a harvest. One of the saddest sights in the history of the pulpit is that of a ministry which regards revivals as abnormal, and which therefore adjusts itself in scholarly ease and refinement to the slow and well-nigh hopeless growth of periods which lie between revivals.

Such a ministry, you will observe, are very apt to find their chief interests and excitements outside of their profession. They give themselves to literature, to science, to art, to reforms, to social life, to the improvement of their private fortunes. Some of our standards in literature have been the work of clergymen who did the work, and could do it, because their professional plans did not contemplate nor aim at overpowering awakenings of the people. Few men in the pulpit can adjust themselves to the divine plans in this respect, as history has thus far given us the means of interpreting them, and yet find time and mental force to create literary standards which shall live to future times. The



exhortations to scholarly aims which we give and receive are always to be accepted with this qualification, that, in a successful ministry, religious awakenings may overwhelm a preacher with professional labors to such degree as to render literary pursuits for the time impracticable. Such awakenings must command the profound and prayerful study of men who mean to be a power in the instrumental control of them.

The practical question is, How are they brought about? What procedure of the pulpit is conducive to them? A country village, remote from the excitement of metropolitan crowds, is agitated by a strange quickening of religious inquiry. Skeptics look upon it as an epidemic. What has Christian philosophy to say of it? What instruments have apparently wrought the change? What methods of preaching, what subjects in the pulpit, what auxiliary agencies outside of the pulpit, have seemed to be the working forces? Hard-featured and cross-grained men are subdued by a female Bible-reader; so that a quaint observer applies to them the old couplet in the primer,—

“Whales in the sea  
God's voice obey.”

What is the secret of her power? A roving evangelist whom three-fifths of the community despise reaches the other two-fifths with such power of moral suasion, that the majority are compelled to smother their contempt, or to express it in tones which echo a secret fear that he is right, and they are wrong. How does he do it? Prayer-meetings are crowded in the “Black Sea” in Boston. A motley assembly of five thousand, whom no other than a religious teacher could keep silent for ten

minutes, are thus held for an hour by the plainest of plain religious talk in Burton's Theatre in New York. Twenty thousand men and women in the Crystal Palace at Sydenham are held in such stillness that they all hear one voice intelligibly. How are these things done? What is the philosophy of the success of such men as Whitefield, Summerfield, Spurgeon, Finney, Moody?

Right or wrong, normal or abnormal, these are facts in popular history. They are known and read of all men. They assume the importance of crises in the history of nations. In our own day they are growing to the magnitude of the old Roman gladiatorial shows. The simple power of speech seems now to be achieving results in popular excitement, which in Pagan life could be created only by brutal and sanguinary spectacles. What philosophy of speech can explain them? Wise is the man who can give the reason why speech should thus supplant the dagger and the lasso and the trident.

As specimens of the questions on this subject which a preacher needs to ask and answer, let the following be specified:<sup>1</sup> Are revivals of religion a normal method of divine working for the world's conversion? What is their relation to divine sovereignty? Are any laws of the working of the Holy Spirit in them discoverable? In what condition of the popular mind are revivals to be looked for? What agency of the pulpit is preparative to a revival? What agencies auxiliary to the pulpit are most essential? Are evangelistic labors desirable under a settled ministry? What types of theology are dominant in the most valuable revivals? What place

<sup>1</sup> The majority of these inquiries have been published in the appendix to the "Theory of Preaching."

should be assigned in them to doctrinal preaching? Has the service of song any special value in them? Are children proper subjects of conversion in revivals? What are the pathological perils incident to such awakenings? How are those perils avoidable? How can they be counteracted when not avoidable? Are minds of high culture naturally subject to these popular awakenings? Does the subsidence of a revival imply religious decline? Does popular re-action from a revival neutralize its value? What policy of the pulpit should characterize the period immediately following a revival? What are the differences, if any, between the type of piety of those who meet the religious crisis of their lives in revivals and those who meet it in more tranquil times? What is that change in professing Christians which often occurs in revivals, and is called "reconversion"? Is President Edwards's work on the "Religious Affections" adapted to the present religious inquirers?

If, by a philosophic study of these and kindred questions, we can come at those principles of human nature which underlie the divine economy in the sympathetic awakenings of society to the realities of eternity, we gain thereby the very pith and marrow of homiletic culture. I repeat, therefore, Study the great awakenings of the past. Investigate the spiritual life of the Reformation. Read Tracy's history of the "Great Awakening" in President Edwards's day. Observe critically the similar movements of our own day. Read the "Year of Grace in Ireland," the "History of the Hawaiian Islands," the "History of Missions in Madagascar." Study the lives of pre-eminent revival preachers. Read the memoirs of Whitefield, Wesley, Nettleton, Finney, Lyman Beecher, Dr. Kirk. Observe narrowly the facts

of current history bearing on the subject. Be familiar with the ministries of such men as Mr. Spurgeon. Learn something from them all. Study opposite characters in the history of revivals.

Above all, preserve a docile state of mind in such studies. Take an expectant attitude. Look for progressive evolution of wisdom in the administration of the pulpit. Never allow your mind to settle down in a quiescent state, under the conviction that the policy of the pulpit is fixed by the past for all time.

A most fatal position to the clergy of a nation is that assumed by a portion of the clergy of this country and of England, which holds them aloof from the experience of modern revivals, and which some of them avow as antagonistic to such awakenings. Fatal, I say, is such an attitude to the spiritual power of the ministry. A pulpit thus sundered from these quickenings of the popular heart can never be the pulpit of the future. The work of this world's redemption will sweep grandly over it, and bury it in oblivion. Or, if it lives, it can represent only a fragmentary and sickly development of religious life. It can only build up a Christian infirmary in which shall be gathered the invalid classes of Christian minds. All the signs of our age indicate increase rather than diminution of these popular excitements. The ministry must understand them, must be in sympathy with them, must be masters in the control of them, or must perish under the billows of them which are sure to roll in upon the church of all coming time.

Time frame  
is late 1800s  
but can be  
applied to  
21st century.