THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER NINE

THE THEME-CONTINUED

SUMMARY

Sermons may be arranged according to the character of their theme.

DOCTRINAL SERMONS

1. What is doctrinal preaching?

a. Negatively:

(1) Does not oppose the inculcation of morals;
(2) Not necessarily apologetic;
(3) Not necessarily polemical.

b. Positively:

(1) Emphatically didactic;
(2) Philosophical;
(3) Practical.

2. Why doctrinal preaching is important:

(1) In the interests of preaching itself;
(2) In the interests of the preacher;
(3) In the interests of a sound and intelligent belief.
The decay of such preaching leads to:

(a) The preaching of mechanical formulas, or
(b) Preaching sermons without a Christian basis;

(4) In the interests of moral reformation.

II. ETHICAL SERMONS. DEFINITION. CLASSIFICATION

1. Sermons enforcing personal duties:

(1) Demanded by the claims of religion;
(2) And by right living.

2. Sermons enforcing relative duties.

III. HISTORICAL SERMONS

1. True to the method of Scripture.
2. In sympathy with our own instincts.
3. On a line with prevailing taste.

NOTE. Care to be taken in this kind of preaching.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL SERMONS

Why seldom heard of; Value.
Four-fold aim: To stimulate, comfort, correct, instruct.

V. OCCASIONAL SERMONS

Classification. Importance.

Classification of Sermons

SERMONS may conveniently be arranged on the basis of the character of their themes. Although it should be understood that the sermon need not confine itself rigidly within the limits of any one arbitrary division to the neglect of others which ought to be considered, yet such a classification has its advantages.

We suggest the following grouping as sufficient for our purpose: Doctrinal, ethical, historical, experimental, and occasional sermons.

I. Doctrinal Sermons

1. We begin by asking, what do we understand by doctrinal preaching? Let it be made clear at once that there are certain things which we do not mean.

(1) For example: Doctrinal preaching neither ignores nor opposes the inculcation of morality. Who indeed can say where dogma ends and morality begins? (Lane, "*Life of Alex. Vinet*," p. 147).

Should not a doctrine lie at the foundation of every duty, and a duty rise as the superstructure from every doctrine? (Proverbs 23:7)

"Treat doctrines practically," counsels Dr. J. W. Alexander, "and experience argumentatively." What moral applications are more convincing than those of Jonathan Edwards? Yet they are found in the very sermons which are most powerful in their doctrinal basis (*E. g.*, sermon on Acts 16:29, 30).

(2) Nor again, is doctrinal preaching necessarily apologetic.

The protest of Robert Hall was needed more in his day than it is in our own, and yet it is in place still: "It is degrading to the dignity of a revelation established through a succession of ages by indisputable proof to be adverting every moment to the hypothesis of its being an imposture; to be inviting every insolent sophist to wrangle with us about the title, when we should be cultivating the possession" ("*Works*," Vol. II., p. 299).

"Christianity," observed George III., when he was presented with Bishop Watson's "*Apology for Christianity*,' "needs no apology"; and Maurice is no doubt right when he insists that "theology is made the weakest of all studies because its basis is laid - as the basis of no other study is laid - in apology."

(3) Still less is doctrinal preaching necessarily polemical.

Accustom yourself in preaching to explain. Make your hearers understand the matter in hand by means of clear statements (See Dean Swift's "*Letter to a Young Clergyman*."). Then, if it still be necessary to do so, argue. If you must deal with a doctrine polemically or apologetically, preach it historically; find its basis in Scripture, trace its subsequent course, and in this way lay a firm foundation for any conclusions which you may wish to draw (Dale, "*Yale Lectures*," pp. 71, 72).

What then is doctrinal preaching? Passing now to the positive answer to our question, we reply:

(1) It is, first, emphatically <u>didactic</u>. It is fitted to instruct (II Timothy 3:16, 17).

If it follows a line of biblical induction, gathering and grouping all the passages which bear upon a certain doctrine, the true doctrinal sermon does so for the sake of its practical application to the spiritual life of the hearers (Taylor, "*Yale Lectures*," p. 155).

Doctrinal preaching should therefore be scriptural. All the doctrines with which the preacher needs to deal, he must find in the Bible, and he will do well to confine himself in the main to the doctrines on which the Bible lays the most emphasis.

(2) At the same time it should be <u>philosophical</u>, inasmuch as it treats of the laws by which we are governed. Almost all great doctrinal preachers have been metaphysicians, and indeed some of them have been tempted to make their metaphysics prominent at the expense of their Bibles.

We are set in the pulpit not so much to defend the ways of God to men, as to declare them. The preacher, especially if he has only lately exchanged the air of the schools for the freer breezes of everyday life, must guard himself against the use of philosophical, metaphysical, and even theological terms in the pulpit.

Such phrases as “original sin,” “total depravity,” “the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity,” and such terms as “the Trinity,” “the procession of the Holy Ghost,” mean little or nothing to our hearers. As well talk of “consubstantiation,” or “monism,” or “trichotomy.”

Use great plainness of speech. Cause the people to understand, as did Ezra from his pulpit of wood (Nehemiah 8:8).

Translate the terminology of the schools into the vernacular of Scripture. If it will not bear translation, it will not bear preaching. You will do well to remember that alike in its vocabulary and in its methods of statement biblical theology is the true theology for us to preach.

(3) If doctrinal preaching must be scriptural and philosophical, it must also be practical.

Beware then, of simply exposing error, for “even when conversed with for good ends error is perturbing, paining, defiling, misleading, and wasteful of time” (J. W. Alexander).

See to it that to every setting forth of doctrine there is a practical application. You may find it hard to mingle doctrine and practice in due proportion in your preaching; but this is what you need to do. The late Prof. Elmslie “seldom preached,” we are told, “on the formal doctrines of theology, but they were latent and implied in every sermon he delivered.”

Longfellow hears a discourse two hours long on the Atonement, and confesses himself quite bewildered after the first five minutes; and there is a touch of not unkindly sarcasm in the added words in his journal, “We came out in a drenching rain.”

2. Let us pass on to inquire why doctrinal preaching is important?

(1) The history of the pulpit furnishes us with our first answer.

It is important in the interests of preaching itself.

“Through constant changes in the direction of interests, theological themes remain the themes of supreme interest to thinking men” (President Eliot, Harvard University).

In the hands of a skilled and competent preacher doctrinal preaching is of all preaching the most popular. The throngs never tired of gathering to hear C. H. Spurgeon, perhaps the most doctrinal preacher of our century. From the beginning of his ministry in Birmingham, Dr. Dale preached doctrinal sermons, and when he was warned at the outset that his congregation would not stand it, he answered sturdily, “They will have to stand it.”

They stood it so well that he spent his life with that one church, and never preached more doctrinally or with greater acceptance than at the last. We may grant that to preach doctrine well is not easy, but the pulpit has always declined under easy preaching as it has always risen in power and importance when it has braced itself to grapple with great subjects.

(2) It is inevitable therefore that doctrinal preaching should be important, in the interests of the preacher.

It will be of immense spiritual benefit to him to be moving among high things. He will not only feel what Dean Stanley called “the consolidating effect of an arduous and sustained effort,” but, better far, he will share the experience of Jonathan Edwards, who when he felt his heart growing cold used to regain the spiritual glow by reading for an hour in the deepest doctrines.

“Thicken your exhortation with doctrine,” Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, said to the Oxford students of his day; and this because the preacher himself needs to strike his roots deep in the great truths of his religion.

An Oxford professor of our own time - himself a preacher - advises his brethren to read scientific theology for an hour at least every day, instead of “running from house to house for committee and other meetings” (Professor Shuttleworth).

“We shall never have great preachers,” said Spurgeon, “till we have great divines” (“*Lectures to My Students*,” Series I., Lecture X).

(3) We add that doctrinal preaching is important in the interests of a sound and intelligent belief.

History bears us out in saying that the decay of doctrinal preaching is invariably followed by the decay of evangelical faith. It leads to one of two extremes:

Sometimes to the preaching of mechanical dogmatic formulas, and to the use of words which once glowed with the fervor and passion of personal experience, but out of which the fires have now died, leaving in their stead only gray and melancholy ashes.

The phrase “only believe,” for example, if it fails to mean to us what it meant to Wesley and to Whitefield, means little or nothing. There is no virtue in our using historic terms which were formerly the battle cries of spiritual liberty unless our hearts also burn with some measure of the faith which once exulted in them. A bare recital of the mere externals of Christ’s earthly life is not preaching the Gospel. “The Gospel becomes a Gospel by the presence of the doctrine as touching the person of Jesus, that He is the Son of God; as touching His death that He is the sacrifice for the sins of the world” (Dr. Maclaren).

At other times the decline of doctrinal preaching leads to substituting for it sermons which inculcate moral duties indeed, but do so without any Christian basis.

The orthodoxy of the Protestant church of Germany in the last century, for example, by becoming only dogmatic, drove multitudes of thoughtful men into rationalism, because at least that did insist on morality of life as of prime moment. Before long this, in its turn, became powerless to influence conduct, and so prepared the way for the message of Schleiermacher, welcome as the first breath of spring, as it insisted on the vital connection between true morality and a conscious dependence on the living God. Ignoring the natural enmity of the mind to God.

Thomas Chalmers, at the beginning of his ministry, prosecuted, as he says, the actual though undesigned experiment of preaching a high code of morality, pressing on his people "reformation of honor and truth and integrity." But he confesses, "I never heard of any such reformations having been effected amongst them."

Not till he insisted on the alienation of the heart from God, and urged upon their acceptance the free offer of forgiveness through the Blood of Christ, with the kindred doctrines of grace, did he hear of any moral betterment among his hearers.

"You have taught me," he said in his farewell words to his congregation at Kilmeny, "that to preach Christ is the only effective way of preaching morality in all its branches; and out of your humble cottages have I gathered a lesson which I pray God that I may be enabled to carry with all its simplicity into a wider theatre" (Hanna, "*Life of Chalmers*," Vol. I., Chaps. XV, XVI).

(4) After what has been said it needs scarcely be added that doctrinal preaching is important in the interests of moral reformation. Always the rise and fall of morality has coincided with the rise and fall of religion. This has been the case in all ages, and in all lands (Dr. E. G. Robinson, "*Christianity and Ethics*," Lecture IV).

"Ethical injunctions will not save man; the experiment has been widely tried, and it has always been a sad and conspicuous failure" (Dr. Behrends, "*Yale Lectures*," Lecture IL).

We may question the fairness of the comparison which Luther institutes between himself and his fellow reformers, but we cannot question the truth which it expressed. That is secure from challenge:

"Wycliffe and Huss," he says, "assailed the immoral conduct of papists; but I chiefly oppose and resist their doctrine. I affirm roundly and plainly that they preach not the truth - to this I am called. When I can show that the papists' doctrine is false, then I can easily prove that their manner of life is evil. For when the Word remains pure, the manner of life, though something therein be amiss, will be pure also" (Luther, "*Table Talk*," No. CCCCXV).

II. In the Ethical Sermon, to which we next turn, special stress is laid on the moral side of the subject to be treated

While the doctrinal basis is either implied or briefly expounded, the main body of the discourse concerns itself with the ethical aspects of the theme. How important is this group of sermons we shall better understand by attempting to classify them.

1. First, then, come sermons which enforce personal duties.

(1) The claims of religion demand that such sermons shall be preached.

It is a fatal mistake, and yet one which is very prevalent, to affirm that Christianity has little to do with practical morality. To what disastrous consequences this error leads we have already seen.

Yet it is favored by two opposing classes of men:

- by the unbeliever, who has a vague impression that religion has to do exclusively with our duties to God; and
- by the professing Christian, who dreads a paralysis of faith as the result of insisting upon works" (Preface to "Sermons," by Sydney Smith, 1801).

But this conception of the limits of religion is untrue to fact. As we have said in considering doctrinal sermons, no divorce should be proclaimed between faith and practice in the preaching of Christian truth (Hatch, "*Hibbert Lectures*," Lecture VI).

Let us set the matter in its true light by preaching upon personal duties.

Of Philip Henry, his son Matthew says that he was "very large and particular in pressing second-table duties." This insistence on the aspect of the Decalogue which looks toward man is essential if justice is to be done to its Godward aspect also.

So Thomas Arnold counsels his hearers: "Begin by regarding everything from the moral point of view and you will end by believing God."
(2) Nor are such sermons any less important if we widen our view and include right living generally.

How intensely practical must have been the preaching of Paul when it led the sorcerers of Ephesus at a great cost to themselves to burn their books of magic (Acts 19:19), and left to Onesimus, the runaway slave, no other alternative but to go back to his master (Philemon).

Moral results which no one could gainsay accompanied the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century in Germany, Switzerland, and Scotland; the Puritans, who were ardently attached to doctrinal preaching, drew recruits to their ranks by the correctness of their lives; and the Methodist revival made the tradesman throwaway his light weight and unjust balance.

Mr. Gladstone charges the clergy of to-day with not being severe enough on their congregations. "They do not," he says, "sufficiently lay upon the souls and consciences of their hearers their moral obligations, and probe their hearts, and bring up their whole life and action to the bar of conscience."

No praise which he received pleased Carlyle more than the testimony of a tanner whose manufactures were remarkable for their uniform excellence, and who said, "If I had not read Carlyle, I should never have made my leather so good."

The preacher will do well to accustom himself to find what is the moral meaning of the popularity of the book just then in most demand, of the fame of the public hero of the hour, of the event by which men are most deeply moved in war or politics, in commerce or in the life of the community; and having found it, let him make it the theme of a discourse.

2. We enlarge our circle, although the center remains the same, when we pass to relative duties.

Courtesy, considerateness, magnanimity, truthfulness, should receive distinct treatment in the pulpit.

“Be not afraid,” said Robert Hall to a young minister, “of devoting whole sermons to particular parts of moral conduct and religious duty.”

The historian Froude brings a grave indictment against the pulpit when he says: “Many a hundred sermons have I heard in England . . . but never during thirty years one that I can recollect on common honesty or those primitive commandments, ‘**Thou shalt not lie**’ and ‘**Thou shalt not steal**.’”

Under this head we may place sermons upon matters which should interest us as citizens, such as sanitation, temperance, social reforms, and questions touching on our relations to the community in which we live. No event which moves the public mind should be suffered to pass without reference being made to it in our preaching. Without a suspicion of sensationalism we can so deal with current topics that our hearers shall be in no doubt as to what the Christian religion teaches as to the life that now is.

III. Historical Sermons stand in a class by themselves, inasmuch as they exemplify and enforce important ethical principles from Scripture history, and especially from the great characters depicted in its pages

1. This kind of preaching is true to the method of Scripture, which in its narrative parts deals so largely with individual lives, clustering about them current events, and illustrating by means of them the evolution of history.

2. The preacher who can handle well a Scripture character is sure of the attention of a very large proportion of his congregation. “A story: says Cecil, “will hold a child by the ear for an hour together, and men are but children of a larger growth.”

3. Nor is it a point of slight importance that he who learns how to preach thus falls in with the prevailing literary taste.

History as it is written by Carlyle or Froude or Motley or Green deals to a very large extent with the lives of great leaders in their relations to the age in which they lived.

I say “he who learns” to preach sermons cast in the historical mold, because whether the faculty for telling a story be natural to the preacher or acquired, it will cost him pains to make the best use of it. Mere pictorial description is of little service. The homiletical features should be preserved in the sermon or lecture. Ample scope should be given to application and appeal.

The preacher, like the traveler in the mazes of the Roman Catacombs, should carry with him the clue which keeps him in connection with the sunlight of his own day.

Of John Angell James, of Birmingham, England, his biographer says: “In historical sermons he was very successful. Unlike many preachers who tell the story in their introduction and fill the rest of the discourse with mere didactic matter, he interwove the narrative with the instruction, and the climax of the story was often wrought into the peroration. Indeed he could tell the facts in a way that made it almost unnecessary formally to state the moral’“ (Dale, “*Life of J. A. James*,” p. 616).

IV. John Angell James represents a class of preachers to whom the church and the world owe far more than they will ever acknowledge, because their sermons are so largely experimental that while powerfully affecting their own congregations, they are seldom heard of elsewhere.

Of the proverbially short-lived human fame of the preacher they furnish the most conspicuous example. Listened to with reverence and love while living, a few years suffice to make even the names of such preachers strange in our ears.

Their record is in Heaven, and the influence of their discourses remains among those potent but little recognized forces by which unconsciously to ourselves whole generations are molded. Here it is that the value of the Experimental Sermon the next group in our present classification - lies. It deals with the religious experience of Christian people and concerns itself with the practical and often unheroic piety of the believer’s life - with the joys and sorrows, with the trials and temptations of the soul.

The aim of experimental preaching is four-fold. By appealing to the promises and injunctions of the Christian religion it stimulates the believer; it finds in the same treasure-house consolation for the mourner in his bereavement, and for the troubled heart in its trials; enforcing the high standard of the New Testament, it recalls men and women immersed in worldly matters to Christian consciousness; and by throwing light on the various duties of practical piety it instructs a congregation in the conduct of daily life.

The preacher who excels as a pastor will never find himself at a loss for experimental themes, his visits to his people and the incidents of church life will furnish themes in abundance, while his own spiritual life will reveal to him alike the depths in which lie the darkest shadows, and the mountain-peaks where he may “summer high among the saints of God.”

V. Under the class, Occasional Sermons, we put the discourses which every preacher must prepare to deliver, but which lie outside the circle of his ordinary pulpit themes.

He should not neglect the lessons of special times and seasons, such as the new and the old year, Easter and Christmas, when he will be assured that by speaking on the thought which is in every mind he has a point of great importance in his favor.

He should never let patriotic occasions pass by without notice. Thanksgiving he should make worthy of its name, and redeem it from the charge which is with much reason brought against it, that by giving to the preacher a wider range it allows him the chance to indulge in lamentations over current abuses in government and society that are oftener than not as vain as they are lugubrious.

On the other hand, without becoming a partisan, he is bound to insist on every proper occasion upon the national honor, upon the duty of the citizen to vote, and upon the influence of Christian chivalry on the heart of the community.

The history of the American ministry is rich in the stirring appeals of true patriots, and up to the present time the sermon has wielded an immense power in directing and controlling the policy of the American people.

To the same class also belong sermons on philanthropic subjects, such as International Arbitration, Kindness to Animals, Temperance. We reach the widest circle and one of transcendent moment when we mention Christian missions and their claims on the Christian congregation.

In his ordinary ministry the preacher should deal with this lofty and inspiring theme. It is impossible to close our eyes to the fact that to ignorance about missions and to culpable indifference to their paramount and imperious importance on the part of a majority of Christian preachers, we owe it that only on rare occasions, and invariably as a prelude to a collection, do we hear discourses on the very theme which inspired the earthly mission of Jesus and the labors of his apostles. No Sunday should ever pass without distinct reference being made to missions in the prayers, the psalmody, or the sermon of the public service.

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