

THE GOSPEL IDEA OF PREACHING.

by

Robert Lewis Dabney

FROM the days of Enoch, who prophesied (Jude 13), and of Noah, who was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter ii. 5), to our day God has employed “the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” To us who hold that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the religion of Protestants, both the warrant for preaching, as a religious ordinance, and the model for its performance, must be given from the Word of God. The patriarchs, the prophets, probably the Aaronic priests and the pious kings, preached to Israel. But the first full description of the nature of the exercise is the oft-cited passage from Nehemiah viii. 1-8, when Ezra and his associates “*read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.*” Here we have the true scriptural idea of the preacher’s function: to make the people understand what is in God’s word. The Christian minister’s commission is in these words: “Preach the word; (*herald the word;*) be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine.” (2 Tim. iv. 2.) The object of preaching is the salvation of the soul; and that salvation consists in a redemption from the guilt, love and practice of iniquity. The instrument of this redemption is God’s truth, *as he has revealed it*. “Sanctify them through thy truth.” The preacher is most explicitly called a herald; that is, the deliverer of a message. Now, the herald does not make his message, he merely transmits it. He has nothing to do with judging its wisdom or fitness; let him simply proclaim it as it is given to him. This was God’s command to an ancient preacher: “Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it *the preaching that I bid thee.*” (Jonah iii. 2.)

Or, the preacher’s office may be illustrated by the work of one who uses a die put into his hands, to form impressions on some plastic substance. The sinful soul is that substance. The Word of God is the die; and the divine image of knowledge and true holiness is the impression to be formed. God, who made man’s soul, and therefore knows it made the die; and of course he best knew how to make it, to produce the impression he desired. Now, the workman’s business is not to criticize, re-carve, or alter the die which is committed to him, but simply to press it down upon the substance to be shaped. In this view, how plain is it that all preaching must be accurately representative of Bible truth, and in Bible proportions? Else it is not God’s work. The preacher’s business is simply to take what he finds in the Scriptures, and as he finds it, and press it down upon the understandings, hearts, and consciences of men. Nothing else is his business as a preacher. The die is just so sharp and hard, so large and so perfect as God would have it. He judged it was the right die to produce the impression he intends. This is enough for us. Here we have a few obvious truths which none will dispute who are known as evangelical Christians. But if we are not mistaken, they contain the following deductions by which many things, very prevalent in the practice of persons considering themselves evangelical, are condemned.

1. Not only must Bible topics form the whole subject matter of preaching, but they must be presented in scriptural aspects and proportions. God made the Bible for the people; not raw material which the religious philosopher is to work over into new forms. Here is a simple and admitted fact, which is full of neglected inferences. The book of God is not like the book of creation, a mixed and crude mass of the ore of knowledge, which must become the subject of scientific re-arrangement to become intelligible to common minds. The Bible is for the people; this is the great principle of Protestants. And this implies that God, who knew best, has set forth the truth he purposed to apply in such forms and aspects as he knew would best suit the human mind. There can be no other forms of presentation so suitable to the people, because God has chosen these. "The preacher's business is just to show the people what is in the Bible," as God has there set it forth.

2. These principles cut up by the roots the whole fashion of "preaching up the times," as it was quaintly called by our Scotch forefathers. If the preacher's business is the redemption of the soul, and his instrument is the Bible truth, it is plain that he has no business in the pulpit with Nebraska bills, Abolitionism, politics, Eastern questions, and all the farrago of subjects with which infidel ministers of Christianity essay to eke out, as they suppose, the deficient interest and power of the message of salvation. The preacher's business in the pulpit is to make Christians, and not to make free-soilers, Maine-law-men, statesmen, historians, or social philosophers. His message from the pulpit is that which God has put into his mouth, and nothing else. The question may be asked: "Are Bible principles never to be applied, then, to the correction of the social evils of the day by those who are the appointed expounders of the Bible?" So far as God so applies them in the Bible, yes; but no farther. Let the preacher take the application of the principles, as well as the principles applied, from the Word of God; let him take, not only his starting position but his whole topics, from God's word, and he will be in no danger of incurring that sarcasm, as biting as it is just, directed against those who "take their texts from the Bible, and their sermons from the newspapers." Many preachers seem to think that if it is a scriptural principle which they use, it matters not how unscriptural or extra-scriptural is the use which they make of it. They forget that it does not follow, because a man has drawn his weapon from the king's battle; soldiers have sometimes used the sovereign's arms to fight duels with each other. It may be asked again: "Is the preacher to forego and disuse all that influence for social good which his Christian intelligence gives him? Has he ceased to be a citizen and patriot because he has become a minister? No. But when he appears in the pulpit he appears not as a citizen but as God's herald. Here is a very simple and obvious distinction much neglected. The *other* channels of patriotic influence are open to him which other citizens use, so far as he may use them without prejudice to his main calling. To cleave to this alone is made his obvious duty by three reasons. The importance of the soul's redemption is transcendent. All social evils, all public and national ends, sink into trifles beside it. Hence God's ministers owe this practical tribute and testimony at least to this great truth; to devote all the machinery and power of religious ordinances—that single domain into which the all-engrossing world does not intrude—to this one grand object. That minister is false to truth and to his Master who says, by his conduct, that there is anything

on earth important enough to subtract one atom of sacred time or sacred ordinances from their one great object. Again, by securing the redemption of the soul, the preacher will secure all else that is valuable in his hearers. Let him make good Christians, and all the rest will come right without farther care. If we have a nation of Bible Christians, we shall have without trouble all the social order, liberty, and intelligence we need. And last, he who undertakes the work of the social philosopher, the legislator, the politician, will diminish his energies, zeal, time, and influence for promoting his higher object. He will waste on the less those energies of head and heart which were all needed for the greater. He will shut up his access for good to all the minds which are opposed to him on these secular questions, and thus incur a hindrance which will incapacitate him for his own Master's work, by undertaking work which belonged to other people. What is this but treason?

3. From the scriptural idea of the preacher's work we may learn what is the true nature of that spirit in the minister, which thinks it is necessary to take a more ample range in preaching than simply showing the people what the Bible means. How many are there who would shrink back with dread from what they consider so confined a walk of ministerial labour. "There is not interest enough! There is not variety enough! The preacher would not have elbow-room enough to display his mental powers! It is too plodding and simple a business for the theological philosopher! There would not be mental pabulum enough to feed the intellects of well-informed hearers!" And so, in some latitudes, we have, as a supplement to the leanness of the gospel, metaphysical discussions of the psychology of religion, analytic dissections of the religious actings of the human soul. In others we have grandiloquent expositions of the moral system of the universe. In others, scholastic discussions of heads of divinity, splitting up "the bare bones of orthodoxy" into splinters as angular and dry as the gravel of the desert. Now what is all this but unbelief? Or else it is unbelief combined with ignorance of those treasures of heavenly wisdom which the Word of God contains. God puts his sword into the minister's hand, and tells him that with this he shall conquer. He distrusts it, and endeavours to add something more trenchant. God tells him, "take this die and press it on the human soul; the result shall be the lovely image of God." He insists on re-carving it before he will apply it. God says, in his infinite wisdom, "these are the truths which are quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow; and which are discerners of the thoughts and intents of the heart." "No," says the unbelieving servant, "they are dull; I can devise truths more piercing." This is the spirit of infidelity, and such preaching breeds infidelity. Such men are wholly unfit to do the work of that God who "hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty, and base things of the world and things which are despised, yea, and things which are not to bring to naught things that are."

There have been two stages in the defection of the church from the simplicity of the gospel in past days. The first has been when the ministry have held to the truths of the gospel system, but have insisted on arranging and presenting them according to the methods of the fashionable human philosophy

of the day. The second—and it is close to the first—has been when they have gone to human philosophy, both for their arrangement and their doctrines. The eras of efficiency and spiritual might have always been prior to both stages, when the ministry was content to set forth Bible truths in Bible aspects. The preaching of the primitive church was simply scriptural and expository, and the word had free course and was glorified. From Origen's day we find the Christian Fathers constructing their discourses on the principles of philosophy, and a false, artificial rhetoric. Then began the season of shallow and heartless conversions and of general corruption. And soon after came Arianism, Prelacy, Neo-Platonism, Pelagianism, Popery. The same steps of decline were trodden again after the Reformation. Luther and Zwinglius, Farel and Calvin, Latimer and Knox, preached expository sermons, in which the Word of God was simply set forth in its application to the soul; and the consequence was a revival almost as wide as christendom. In the next century succeeded the age of scholastic preaching and the bandying to and fro of orthodox symbols, under which the *odium theologicum* was far more cultivated than the love of God; and then came Rationalism. Many of us are now in the first stage of decline, and many more among us have illustrated its tendencies by passing down to the second. How many are the pulpits in New England, now Socinian, which fifty years ago rung with the metaphysics of religion! (*A la* Jonathan Edwards, as they vainly supposed. They forgot that Edwards wrote his *Freedom of the Will* for philosophers, and preached the simple gospel for his flock.) This class of preachers seems to have selected its favourite and prevalent topic, not by asking what is most nourishing to a believing soul, but "what is best adapted to display my powers of discussion or of analysis?" And so some have occupied the Sabbaths of their people with those polemics by which the philosophic theologian has defended the outworks of Christianity, bordering on the foreign domain of human psychology against infidel assailants. And thus they have committed the absurdity of *feeding* the flock inside the fold with the bristling missiles which should have been hurled at the wolves without. Others of them have dissected, or sublimated, or evaporated, truths which they should have embodied in the warm proportions of life, as though they would try to feed the sheep with an analysis of grass instead of the grass itself, tender, rich and fresh from the green pastures; or would present a kind of chemical resolution into first elements of skin, horns and hair, instead of pieces of the strong meat of the word itself.

4. If the business of the preacher is simply to make the people see and feel what is in the Word of God, preaching should usually be what is popularly known as "expository." In most cases it is no fair exposition of the divine meaning to single out a single proposition from its connection, and fix the whole attention on it, to the exclusion of those truths which God has placed beside it. The Scriptures are a whole. To resume the illustration of the die, if we would produce a whole impression we must impress the whole die. We shall never obtain a symmetrical image by detaching little fragments of a feature, a wreath, or a letter or two of the legend here and there, and enstamping them with great force. Passages of Scripture must be unfolded in their connection. Yea, whole books and epistles must be so applied to the Christian soul. And where we depart from this method, to preach topically upon a single proposition of the Scriptures, it should yet be a true exposition, an evolution of

the meaning of the spirit in that text. There seem indeed to be but two classes of subjects where such preaching is strictly consistent with the gospel minister's position. One is where a single proposition of the Word of God contains a truth so fundamental and so operative that it justifies an unusual expenditure of time. Such are the cardinal doctrines of depravity, the new birth, faith, repentance. The other class is composed of what we may call representative texts; where the single proposition contains the point of a discussion, or the *moral* of a story, stated for us by the Holy Ghost himself. Thus, Romans vi. 1, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" states the subject of discussion of the whole sixth chapter. We may take this one verse for our text, but in doing so it becomes our duty to unfold the argument of the apostle upon it, and not one of our own devising. The sermon is still a true exposition. So Luke xviii. 7 sums up the instruction of the parable of the importunate widow. In preaching on it we expound that parable. The representative text may also be fairly used, though not in juxtaposition with the passages it represents; as John xvii. 21 states what is unfolded in John xv. 1-8, 1 Cor. xii. 11-27, Eph. iv. 16, etc., etc. But still it is God's discussion which is expounded, and not man's.