

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

SOME THOUGHTS ON EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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THERE is general agreement in evangelical circles today that the minister of the gospel should preach expository sermons. Indeed, even in other circles there appears to have been in recent years a return to biblical preaching. Everyone who has listened in these last months to Mr. Graham has been impressed not only by the content and the style of his preaching, but by its expository nature. He himself, in the meeting for ministers in Westminster Central Hall at the conclusion of the Greater London Crusade, expressed his conviction (it was the second in importance out of a total of twelve) that the Crusade's success was partly due to the old-fashioned preaching of God's Word. He exhorted us to preach from our own pulpits with authority, clarity, simplicity, urgency and decisiveness. His example and his exhortation must have awakened a response in many present. What then is this expository preaching?

ITS NATURE

To 'expound' the Word of God is so to treat a verse or a passage from the Bible as to draw out its meaning, its application and its challenge. Exposition is the direct opposite of imposition. The expository preacher comes to the text not with his mind made up, resolved to impose a meaning on it, but with his mind open to receive a message from it in order to convey it to others. 'I have long pursued the study of Scripture with a desire to be impartial . . . In the beginning of my enquiries I said to myself, I am a fool; of that I am quite certain. One thing I know assuredly, that in religion, of myself, I know nothing. I do not therefore sit down to the perusal of Scripture in order to impose a sense on the inspired writers; but to receive one, as they give it me. I pretend not to teach them; I wish like a child to be taught by them' (Charles Simeon, 1831). The dearest desire of the expository preacher is so to speak as to let the Scriptures themselves speak, and so to preach that afterwards the sermon is eclipsed by the growing splendour of the text itself.

THREE STAGES

If a particular text is to be truly expounded, three stages may be detected at least in the preacher's preparation of his material, if not in the congregation's reception of his message. First, the congregation must *understand the meaning* of his text. The preacher is always a teacher. He will need to do much background study of his text, the fruits of which may never be revealed in detail in his sermon. But he can never hope to convey the meaning of his text to his congregation unless he has himself mastered what the sacred writer intended in it. He will take careful note of the historical situation in which the book (where his text appears) came to be written, of the immediate context from which his text arises, of the sequence of thought leading to it and from it, of the exact words chosen by the Holy Spirit in which to clothe His thoughts (cf. 1 Cor. ii. 13), and of other passages of Scripture relevant to the same theme. To help him in thus mastering the text he will need constantly to refer to concordance, lexicon and commentary. Once the precise meaning of the text is understood, the

preacher will be able to state it lucidly and simply. We should not be afraid of direct and candid statement of the truth which emerges from our text. I forget who it was who described the purpose of the introduction, exposition and conclusion of a sermon in the words: 'Tell the people what you are going to tell them; tell them what you have to tell them; and then tell them what you have told them.' Mr. Graham urged us not to be afraid to repeat ourselves. The apostles were not ashamed of repetition. 'To write the same things to you is not irksome to me, and is safe for you,' said Paul (Phil. iii. 1, R.S.V.). 'I think it right,' added Peter, 'as long as I am in this body, to arouse you by way of reminder' (2 Pet. i. 13, R.S.V.). We know well that the most important technique in talking to children is to say one thing and to say it often. We might not do better than follow this advice in all our preaching, since we tend to overrate the mental and spiritual age of our congregation. Let us state the truth. State it clearly. State it bluntly. State it dogmatically. State it often.

But if our congregation is to understand its meaning, it is not sufficient to state it. We must go on to explain it. We shall compare and contrast it with other truths. We shall find examples of it in the Bible. We shall illustrate it, if we can, from personal anecdote, historical event or natural metaphor. We shall use all our sanctified ingenuity to light up the meaning of the text until, by clear and repeated statement, careful explanation and vivid illustration, it is thoroughly understood.

So much mental effort is involved in this first stage that we are tempted to stop there. Whether in our own Bible reading or in our expository preaching there is a danger of our being satisfied with mere intellectual understanding of the text. The preacher who has a little academic bent finds intellectual pleasure in wrestling from a text its hidden meaning. The joy of discovery and the thrill of achievement can be a perilous drug. Our minds must stretch themselves with further thought.

The second stage is that the congregation should *grasp the relevance* of the text. We turn in thought from the pages of the Bible to the people of the congregation. We have meditated on God and His Word. We meditate now on man and his need. We seek to relate truth to life, the heavenly message to the earthly situation. I confess, if I may say this personal word, that I find this very hard. I find it is comparatively easy to become spiritually and intellectually exhilarated by some text or passage, but to expound it in such a way as to leave it unrelated to the people to whom it is preached. No doubt the Holy Spirit can take His own Word and apply it to the mind and heart and conscience of the hearers, and we pray that He will, but this fact cannot absolve us from the responsibility of making our exposition appropriate and relevant. We need therefore not only to know God, in whose name we preach, but man, to whose need we preach. The preacher is not made in the pulpit, or even in the study. Behind his sermon lies himself. He must know God, and he must know man, if he is to be faithful in conveying a true message from the One to the other. It is not enough to spend much time wrestling with the verses of the Bible. He must spend much time also wrestling with the problems of men and women. It is here that the great preachers of the past have excelled. It is not just for their divine insight that we revere them, but for their human sympathy. Such was their knowledge of human nature that they were able to make lofty truth descend into the homes and habits of humble mortals. Their message was never arid theory or airy fantasy. It was realistic, relevant, practical, and within the grasp of an ordinary man's experience. This requires much study too — study of people, how they live and what they think and where they fail. It needs perseverance to undo a piece of silk from a tangled skein. It needs greater skill to use it to effect in an embroidered design. It needs patience to isolate an eternal principle from a

confused biblical situation. It needs more skill to apply it helpfully and accurately to a complicated situation in the twentieth century.

The meaning of the text is understood, and its relevance grasped, but still the exposition is incomplete. The congregation must be made to *feel the urgency* of the message. Of course some preachers attempt to convey an urgency when there is no clear message about which to feel urgent! Probably the opposite tendency is more common. We are painstaking about our explanations; we have not neglected to study the text. We make the application scrupulously relevant to the lives of our hearers. But the message never catches fire. It is cold and dry and dead. It was of this that Richard Baxter was always complaining. 'I marvel how I can preach . . . slightly and coldly, how I can let men alone in their sins, and that I do not go to them and beseech them for the Lord's sake to repent, however they take it and whatever pain or trouble it should cost me. I seldom come out of the pulpit but my conscience smiteth me that I have been no more serious and fervent. It accuseth me not so much for want of human ornaments or elegance, nor for letting fall an uncomely word; but it asketh me "How could'st thou speak of life and death with such a heart? Should'st thou not weep over such a people and should not thy tears interrupt thy words? Should'st not thou cry aloud and shew them their transgressions and entreat and beseech them as for life and death?"' (*The Reformed Pastor*, 1656). Again, 'how few ministers do preach with all their might? . . . Alas, we speak so drowsily or gently, that sleeping sinners cannot hear. The blow falls so light that hard-hearted persons cannot feel it . . . O Sirs, how plainly, how closely and earnestly should we deliver such a message of such nature as ours is, when the everlasting life or death of men is concerned in it . . . What! speak coldly for God and for men's salvation . . . Such a work as preaching for men's salvation should be done with all our might, that the people can feel us preach when they hear us' (*ibid.*).

True exposition can never be dry and cold, because the Word we have to expound is neither dry nor cold. The Bible is a warm-blooded Book. It conveys a message pulsating with life. Everywhere it has a practical purpose. 'These are written that you may believe . . . , and that believing you may have life . . . ' (Jn. xx. 31, R.S.V.). 'The holy scriptures . . . are able to make thee wise unto salvation . . . ' (2 Tim. iii. 15). Their purpose is so to reveal Christ to the sinner as to bring him salvation in its fullest sense, to gain him acceptance before God, to make him grow in holiness, to build him into the Church and to prepare him for the glory which shall be revealed. The Bible is never pure theory. Therefore the exposition of the Bible can never be pure theory either. The purpose of the Bible is not simply to enlighten men, but to change them. We must never forget this element of moral challenge which needs to be taken over from the Bible into our preaching. We must not be content with explanation and application. All true exposition includes exhortation also. The exhortation will be different in each sermon, and will arise naturally from the theme, but exhortation there will always be, whether to worship, to repentance, to faith, to obedience or to holiness.

DIFFERENT KINDS

These three stages of biblical exposition hold good whatever the basis of the message. The most common text is the single verse, but there is great value in the exposition of a series of verses, a paragraph, a chapter, a book or even an author's complete message. There is a place also for the exposition of a biblical theme traced in several distinct passages or throughout the whole Bible. We need to vary the nature of our text. Our commission is to preach the whole Word, and not to stop short of 'declaring . . . the

whole counsel of God' (Acts xx. 27). If we have a settled ministry, with the privilege of preaching frequently to the same congregation, we shall find great profit (for ourselves as much as for our congregation) in courses of sermons, either in the consecutive exposition of a book of the Bible, or in a series of related biblical topics. Without such planned preaching the tendency is to leave great tracts of revealed truth unexplored and uncharted. It is a salutary discipline to ask oneself how often, if at all, one has courageously tackled such difficult doctrines as the Trinity, the sacraments and the after-life.

SOME METAPHORS

That expository preaching is the ministry envisaged by the New Testament writers is apparent from the metaphors they employ to describe it. The preacher is a sower of seed (1 Cor. iii. 6-9), but the seed he sows is given to him. The preacher is a builder (1 Cor. iii. 9-15), but he may build neither on his own foundation, nor to his own plans, nor with his own materials. The only foundation is Jesus Christ, the building is God's and the only durable materials are 'gold, silver and precious stones'. The preacher is a herald, but the good news he proclaims is not of his own devising. It is God's good news about His Son (Rom. i. 1-3). More striking still are the metaphors of the workman and the steward. In 2 Tim. ii. 15, 16 Paul urges Timothy to become a workman approved and unashamed, by learning to 'cut straight' the Word of truth. This verb, unique in the New Testament but occurring in the LXX version of Proverbs iii. 6, is used of making roads and ploughing furrows. The Word is likened to a road. Timothy is exhorted to preach as accurately and as plainly as if he were laying out a road, so that his hearers easily understand and follow what he says. The stewardship metaphor is a favourite of Paul's. He often refers to the gospel as a 'deposit' which has been entrusted to him (e.g. 1 Tim. i. 11, vi. 20 and perhaps 2 Tim. i. 12, 13). Now the particular quality of a steward is faithfulness (1 Cor. iv. 1). He is expected to guard and to dispense to the household the exact commodities committed to him by the householder, nothing else, nothing more, nothing less. Similarly, the preacher, to whom is committed the stewardship of 'the mysteries of God' (i.e. His revealed secrets, now recorded in Scripture), is to commit them 'to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also' (2 Tim. ii. 2). In all these metaphors the preacher is not expected to proclaim his own ideas or his own views. The sower is given his seed, the builder his materials, the herald his news, the workman his road, the steward his goods. He is simply to be faithful in expounding a revealed Word.

VALUE AND COST

The value of expository preaching is clear. There is power in it, because there is authority in it. Divine authority lends it divine power. Paul draws a distinction between a gospel preached 'in word only' and a gospel preached 'in power' (1 Thes. i. 5). Man's word has no power. But, God says, 'my word . . . that goeth forth out of my mouth . . . shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it' (Is. lv. 11). 'The power of God unto salvation' is in the gospel (Rom. i. 16), not in the world's wisdom but in God's Word, not in human speculation but in divine revelation (1 Cor. i. 21). To be able to say honestly and sincerely 'It is written', 'Thus saith the Lord' is to claim an authority and a power no merely human words could ever command.

This preaching which is so valuable is also, however, very costly. It involves hard work and painstaking toil. We cannot teach others the meaning of a text unless we have grappled with it until it yields its meaning and discloses its treasure. We cannot apply it helpfully without meditating unhurriedly on its implications for men's daily needs. We cannot exhort people to respond to its challenge unless we are burning with its fire ourselves. We cannot teach or apply or exhort at all unless we are humble and open-minded ourselves. We need to have elastic minds, which never harden into a rigid system, but are always ready to absorb new truths from the Word. He who would be a teacher of others must remain a learner himself. In a word, we must pray. We must pray for increasing light on the holy text, for deeper understanding of its practical implications, and for grace to apply it to our own hearts, until the light breaks and the fire burns and we cannot hold our peace.

THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

IN THE ACTS AND THE EPISTLES

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THE active ministry of the Son of God may be summed up in a few words: He came 'to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick' (Lk. ix. 2). And the remarkable features in His work of healing set it out as unique. It stands alone, above and apart from all possible parallels in human experience; it was part of His essential distinction as the God-Man. But we find that there were also certain miraculous healings in the apostolic age of the Acts, and some of the case-histories, preserved by a physician belonging to the Hippocratic school of medicine, may seem hardly less wonderful than those in the life of Christ Himself. But the apostles who wrought miracles could not do so apart from the power of His Name, and even in detail there seems to have been a conscious imitation of Christ as the unique Master of such healing. This is clearly illustrated in the contrast between our Lord's words to the man sick of the palsy and the words of Simon Peter to the paralytic. The Lord Jesus spoke with simple authority: 'Arise, and walk' (Mt. ix. 5). Peter had to amplify the stark simplicity of those words: 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk' (Acts iii. 6). But while powers of healing in Christ's Name were given to men such as Peter and Paul in certain emergencies, they were never so dominant an element in their life and work as in the case of the Son of Man. Acts of healing were at all times subordinate to the proclamation of the gospel; sometimes they seem to have been in suspense altogether. Timothy was not healed from the infirmity which hampered his labours; there was no miraculous intervention in the case of Epaphroditus when he lay at the point of death. We are therefore compelled to ask ourselves whether the powers of healing known to the apostles were meant to form a part of the permanent heritage of the Church, or whether they were just a temporary phase which was meant to pass away. Were such powers of healing, for example, like the wind and fire on the day of Pentecost? They came as signs of the descent of the Holy Ghost. The signs have passed away, but the inner reality of a Spirit-filled life remains. So we would claim that such acts of healing have passed away; they were temporary, and charismatic, and unique. But the kingdom of which they were signs has come to remain.