

LECTURE V.

THE TEXT.

THIS term is well understood as meaning the portion of the Scriptures upon which a sermon is founded. A preliminary question may deserve a brief inquiry before our discussion of that subject proceeds. It is, whether there is reason for the employment of texts by preachers. Some eminent critics, among whom may be mentioned Voltaire,¹ have denounced the usage as senseless. They have urged that no similar custom ever prevailed among the orators of classic antiquity; that it is artificial and unnatural; that it imposes a mischievous necessity upon the sacred orator of weaving his whole discourse out of the contents of a single sentence, which tempts him to artificial and strained divisions; and that it even occasions an abuse of the integrity of the scriptural meaning, because an apt text cannot be found, in words, for every religious or moral duty to be taught, and the preacher is thus tempted to wrest a passage to suit his special purpose.

In defending the uniform use of texts I wish to admit expressly that many abuses of them, by both the Romanist and Protestant clergy, justify a part of these

¹ "Remarks upon the Influence of *Père Bourdaloue* over the French Pulpit."

criticisms. Where pastors confine themselves, according to our unfortunate fashion, to texts of a single sentence, instead of explaining the Scriptures in their connection; where they wrest or accommodate the meaning to cover their human speculations; where they employ a fragment of the Word as a mere motto; these exceptions against their usage are justly taken. But when I defend the employment of texts, it is their legitimate use, which is to be unfolded anon.

In reply then to the condemnation of the usage, I urge that the posture of the preacher is essentially different from that of all other speakers. His only work is to expound and apply to the people an authoritative message from God. This is too extensive to be unfolded in one discourse; he must therefore present it in successive parts. What then more natural, yea necessary, than that he should preface the exposition of the day with the words of the divine message which he is then to expound? There must be a reference, either express or tacit, to that message. The whole authority of his addresses to the conscience depends upon the correspondence evinced between his explanations and inferences and the infallible Word. It appears, then, that the use of texts is not an artificial fashion, but a custom dictated by the very nature of the preacher's peculiar mission. Let us suppose an instance from secular oratory nearest akin to this: that there was in the commonwealth an order of ministerial officers whose chief duty was to instruct the citizens in the constitution of the state, presenting this fundamental law as the sole ground of authority for all other magistrates and laws. Obviously, we should expect to hear such a teacher reg-

ularly read the portion of the constitution he was about to explain, if not at the beginning, yet at some cardinal juncture of his discourse. This portion would be virtually his text. Such discourse could not proceed without it. It may be added that the use of the text is now venerable by long custom, and that its formal announcement gives weight and authority to the instructions thence derived. There is then no cause to omit, and every reason to preserve, the usage.

The first and most important difference of texts (and thence of sermons) is that between the long and the short. If the text contains a number of verses of Scripture, the whole of which are to be explained and applied in their connection, the discussion is called an "expository" sermon. If the text contains only a single proposition, or at most a brief passage of the Word presenting one point, it is denominated by some a "textual" and by others a "topical" sermon. But both of these terms are inaccurate here, for assuredly every expository sermon ought to be textual in the true sense, and you will learn that many expository and narrative sermons may be topical. I acknowledge that I am not careful to invent a more exact name for this species of discourse upon insulated fragments of Scripture, which should never have had place in the Church at all. We will call them, for convenience, sermons without context.

If you ask me to compare these several kinds of sermons, I shall reply that all should be virtually expository, else they are not true sermons. A prevalent exercise of the pulpit should be the delivery of those explanations of connected passages of Scripture which are called in our books of Church order, "popular lec-

tures," in modern phrase "expository preaching." And when the pastor discusses only a single sentence or proposition of Scripture, as he will often and legitimately do, it should yet be a true exposition, an evolution of the meaning of God in that sentence, with constant and faithful reference to its context. There are but two kinds of single propositions which can properly be made subjects of this species of sermons. One is, of those propositions which contain truths so cardinal to the whole system of redemption, that it is proper the preacher should give them particular and abundant attention, according that large space allotted to them in the Bible itself. Such are the fundamental doctrines of original sin, the new birth, justification by faith, repentance, satisfaction for guilt, divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Single sentences, or even clauses of the Scripture, setting forth transcendent truths like these, may well receive the exclusive treatment of a whole sermon. These I would call *capital texts*. To give them such prominence is but conforming to the "proportion of faith," for the Bible itself gives similar extent to its treatment of them. A sermon on such a text, if it is what it should be, is in the best sense expository, for it explains whole tracts of the Scripture teachings, which, whether standing in the sacred page near to, or remote from, the particular text discussed, have their fair representation in it. The other kind is that which I would call *epitome texts*, where a single proposition contains the point of a whole discussion, the moral of a whole parable or history summed up for us by the Holy Spirit himself. Thus, Rom. vi. 1 ("What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace

may abound)?" states the prevalent subject of discussion in the whole sixth chapter. The pastor may adopt this single verse as his text. But it is then his duty to unfold the argument of the Holy Ghost upon it, and not one of human device; so that his sermon is substantially an exposition of the whole passage. So Luke xviii. 7, 8 ("And shall not God avenge his own elect? . . . I tell you that he will avenge them speedily") gives us the intended "moral" of the parable of the importunate widow. In preaching from it correctly we expound the parable. The epitome text may also be used, although not in juxtaposition with the passages which it compresses. Thus, John xvii. 21 ("As thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us," etc.) states what is unfolded in John xv. 1-8, or in 1 Cor. xii. 11-17, or in Eph. iv. 16, etc. But still, if the preacher is faithful to his duty in preaching on the Saviour's petition, he will pursue only a scriptural exposition of it, so that his sermon will be expository of a part or all of these more expanded statements.¹ I repeat, that unless the single proposition is related to the Word in one of these ways, it is not suitable for a sermon; that a discussion without scriptural context is not true preaching, and that, in the sense above defined, there is no other species of preaching than the expository.

But I would urge that the expository method (understood as that which explains extended passages of Scripture in course) be restored to that equal place

¹ For other specimens of the epitome text, compare Gen. xv. 6 with Rom. iv.; Gen. vi. 3, first half, with Heb. x. 26-29; Tit. iii. 8 with Tit. ii. 11 to iii. 7; Luke xvi. 9 with vv. 1-8.

which it held in the primitive and Reformed Churches ; for, first, this is obviously the only natural and efficient way to do that which is the sole legitimate end of preaching, convey the whole message of God to the people. I point to the fact that no one ever thinks of teaching the text-book of any other science in any other way. What would be thought of the master who professed to teach a system of geometry or mechanics by commenting in a brilliant way on one and another apothegm selected from the author? If you will recall the scriptural theory of preaching which was stated at the beginning, you will see that it gives us no other conception of the work than the expository. It is to unfold to the hearers the counsel of God for their salvation. To accomplish this it is not enough to dwell with disproportioned fulness on some fragments. A continuous exhibition must be made at least of those important books of the Scripture which present the system of redemption, with reference to the remainder for illustration. Let us recur to the just simile of the die impressing its image and superscription on a plastic substance. To produce a fair transcript, the artisan must press it down equably, and place the whole outline upon the wax. This is accomplished by the exposition in course of the chief parts of the Bible. But our fragmentary, modern method of preaching without context is as though the servant to whom the die is committed should divide it into small pieces, and then, selecting favourite letters of the legend or features of the carving, should force them into the wax at a high temperature and with extravagant pressure. But the remainder is scarcely brought into the faintest contact

with the surface. What can one expect save a cluster of rude, shapeless indentations rather than the symmetrical imprint of the Redeemer's beauteous image on the soul? You may ask, "Will not this unconnected series of theological lessons yet form in the end a complete outline of scriptural doctrine?" I answer, nothing short of the regular expository method will give assurance of this. The same impulses which have caused us to prefer the fragmentary method will be very certain to limit our range of subjects. Does any one hear of an instance where one of these preachers has faithfully carried his charge through the Confession of Faith, or any similar didactic summary, in a series of doctrinal sermons? No. Our caprice, our fondness for some topics rather than others, our indolent reluctance to grapple with those heads of doctrine of which we are less informed beforehand, the exigencies of pastoral interruptions, always ensure a partial range of instruction. But the course of sermons on the Confession would still be inferior to the course of sermons on the Bible, because the latter gives us God's infallible arrangement, natural, historical and germinant, while the former gives us man's.

This remark suggests a second, not less important. The connections of truths among themselves are as essential to the system as the separate propositions. No man understands the system until he comprehends these relations. Now, however complete may be the circle of points presented by the faulty, modern mode their scriptural relations are not taught to the people. Expository preaching is necessary to show them how truth affects truth, and how to connect the parts of their

creed. We have found no better description of the preacher's work than that given by Nehemiah of Ezra's: he "read in the book of the law of the *Lord* distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." A prime object of pastoral teaching is to teach the people how to read the Bible for themselves. A sealed book cannot be interesting. If it be read without the key of comprehension, it cannot be instructive. Now, it is the preacher's business, in his public discourses, to give his people teaching by example, in the art of interpreting the Word: he should exhibit before them, in actual use, the methods by which the legitimate meaning is to be evolved. Fragmentary preaching, however brilliant, will never do this. The pastor must teach his flock how to expound for themselves, by frequent practice in company with them.

Do not these observations explain much that is imperfect in the Christian character of our day? There is a profusion of preaching and public exercises; yet there is far less scriptural intelligence among our church-goers than among our ruder forefathers. The religious opinions of the Church reflect the narrow, partial and exaggerated traits of the pulpit. The people are not grounded in the Scriptures. There is little symmetry or stability in their religious character. Hence the facility with which they permit the thousand sects of the day to pervert the Word into a seeming support of their errors.

Third. The improvement of the pastor in biblical knowledge is closely connected with that of his people. He must profit in the Scriptures for their advantage. He who does not preach many expository sermons will

seldom become an able and learned interpreter. So irregular and exacting are the duties of the pastor, it is practically inevitable that his studies must be chiefly shaped by the direct demands of his pulpit tasks. He will find himself compelled to study mainly those things which will prepare him for the next Sabbath's sermon. If this is to be a discussion on a single proposition without context, his inquiries may lead him to theological text-books, to literary sources, to human dialectics. These are the helps which furnish him with the artificial division and topics which he seeks. But he will be diverted from the direct study of the Word which should be his chief labour. If, on the other hand, his preparation be expository, his studies must be of that kind. Thus he will become mighty in the Scriptures, and "his profiting will appear unto all."

Fourth. The expository method secures for the pastor sundry conveniences and advantages. One of these not to be disdained is, that he is thus relieved of the harassing doubt and hesitation which often attend the selection of a text. Instead of having his spirits consumed for a day by this question, he proceeds at once to attack the work of preparation which is laid out for him in advance. Another gain is, that it enables the preacher to embody and use many points which, separately, are too brief to offer a sufficient tract of thought for a whole sermon. Many such are presented to the modern preacher in his Bible-reading. They offer a few interesting and suggestive thoughts. At the first glance he thinks he has in them capital subjects for sermons but when he proceeds to elaborate them, they are found incapable of farther extension. If sermons of ten

minutes' length were in vogue, they would be exactly suited for them ; but as they cannot be expanded, without platitude, to forty-five minutes, he must forego them, or else trifle with his task.¹ Now, in expository preaching all this material is employed ; for these brief tracts of thought being connected by the natural tie of the context, are all interwoven into the discourse. Not seldom, these minor subjects assume a temporary importance which, if their discussion has been neglected, will cause the minister to regret his oversight. For instance, one would scarcely deem it appropriate to demand the whole morning hour of a large audience, assembled to learn the way of salvation, for an explanation of the precept, "Swear not at all." Matt. v. 34. His sensible hearers would say that he were better employed teaching lost souls how to escape hell. Yet it may well happen that some day an intrusive Tunker or Quaker may here embarrass the consciences of many good people in his charge, if ignorant of the scriptural solution. Now, had this pastor expounded the "Sermon on the Mount" in course, he would have found the suitable and graceful occasion to say these few paragraphs which are needed on this subject.

A more weighty advantage is, that the expository method enables the pastor to introduce without offence those delicate subjects of temptation and duty, and those obnoxious doctrines and rebukes, which, on the

¹ For example, I once heard a minister occupy a large country congregation with a refutation of the crotchet of Adam Clarke in favour of Judas' salvation. The people were at first interested ; but at the end of fifteen minutes the subject was exhausted, and they were left with the blankest appearance of surprise and discontent.

opposite method, always incur so much *odium*. The fragmentary preacher will find it a very difficult and delicate thing to request his charge to give him the Sabbath hour for the discussion of polygamy, of divorce, of the other sins against chastity. The taste of man will be disgusted. They will ask, "What foul taint does our pastor suspect in us, that he supposes these offensive subjects necessary?" Yet there may be good cause—if not now, hereafter. Some Mormon emissaries may seduce some of the more ignorant and unstable to his abominable creed. Some better minds may be harassed with skeptical difficulties concerning the polygamy of the saints of the old dispensation. We know that the awkward silence of the pulpit concerning the seventh commandment has been the occasion of much of the shocking levity of opinion which prevails as to its breach. Now, if the pastor has engaged to preach an exposition of the whole book of Exodus, all is made easy. He did not introduce these subjects there: it is God who has done it; and if he would be faithful, he has no option to omit them. So, the doctrine of predestination is so obnoxious to some minds that to obtrude it voluntarily on them is, in their eyes, almost an assault. But if the pastor is expounding in course the Epistle to the Romans, he cannot be blamed by the most unreasonable for treating that point; for it is obviously there, and he has no choice. Once more, if the pastor introduces, of his own motion, denunciations against a sin which is prevalent among a particular class or with a few persons, there is danger of a violent outcry against his "personalities." He is charged with singling out the objects of his criticism in order to

inflict a malicious pain, by making their fault conspicuous; for no transgressor is impudent enough to make open complaint because God rebukes him in His word. But if the language of condemnation stands in the passage which comes up regularly for exposition, the cavil is silenced. It was not the choice of the minister that the sin of these men is now denounced: it was their own choice that they impinged against the immutable law of God.

Fifth. The immemorial usage of the Church should commend this method to us. The sketch which I gave you of the history of preaching showed that this exercise among the Hebrews, the apostolic and the primitive Christians, was expository. The opposite method was traced by antiquaries to the Romish clergy of the dark ages. The great Reformation was emphatically a reformation of the pulpit in this particular, and a revival of expository preaching. The better Puritans still honoured the custom; and it has been left for our century to imitate the error of the twelfth and to discard the method again. But even our age has not been wholly without instructive witnesses: some of the most eminent and useful pastors who have adorned the Church have continued to honour the ancient usage. Among these may be mentioned Dr. John M. Mason. It was his custom to occupy the morning hour with an expository discourse, and the evening with the free discussion of some scriptural principle or fact evolved by the explanations of the morning. He has left his emphatic testimony against the neglect of expositions in the sermon preached to his people on resigning his charge in New York. He here says (speaking of the

choice of his successor), "Do not choose a man who always preaches upon insulated texts. I care not how powerful or eloquent he may be in handling them. The effect of his power and eloquence will be to banish a taste for the word of God, and to substitute the preacher in its place. You have been accustomed to hear that word preached to you in its connection. Never permit that practice to drop. Foreign churches call it *lecturing*, and, when done with discretion, I can assure you that, while it is of all exercises the most difficult for the preacher, it is, in the same proportion, the most profitable for you. It has this peculiar advantage, that, in going through a book of Scripture, it spreads out before you all sorts of character and all forms of opinion, and gives the preacher an opportunity of striking every kind of evil and error, without subjecting himself to the invidious suspicion of aiming his discourses at individuals."

The real obstacles to the adoption of this mode of preaching are two: the fear that it will not interest the people, and the preacher's indolence. To the first I would reply, that the popular caprice is no safe rule to the gospel-minister in choosing his methods of pastoral instruction. If this sycophantic motive may cause him to give his charge sermons without context, while he knows that they are defective as means of edification, why may it not justify sacred theatricals also, or any other trick of the clerical mountebank? If expository preaching is necessary for the best interests of the people, the faithful servant of Christ has no option to discard it: he is bound to employ it, rendering it as attractive as he innocently can. While it has less glitter and

ostentation than the other method, if the preacher does his duty in it, he will not find it lacking in solid pleasure. Good expository preaching is always permanently attractive, and always most attractive to those whom it is most important to attract. It meets the great appetite of the human mind—the desire to know; it instructs. No man who has any intelligent sensibility toward sacred things can fail to make the reflection that, if the Bible is our authoritative rule of faith, then it is a matter of transcendent, of infinite concern to him to get the right meaning of that book. But all popular readers of the Scriptures have a strong consciousness of their own blindness of mind to much that they read there. They feel that in many places they have not the key of knowledge. Hence, he who proposes to open the meaning of the Scriptures meets the most serious desire of their religious nature. If this work is done successfully, without undue pedantry and prolixity, but with a plain and honest mastery of the task, which is obvious to the good sense of the hearer, if his judgment is convinced that the preacher has indeed given him the clue of correct understanding, nothing can be so attractive to him. He feels that this is precisely what he needed. The expository method is also naturally adapted to sustain the interest of common minds, in that it provides them with frequent and easy transitions of subject. To be held long to the contemplation of the same abstract thought is exceedingly irksome to them. Indeed, the ability to retain the same ideas fixed before the mind's inspection, for a long time continuously, is the last and highest result of severe philosophic training. It was this which made a Newton's mind as that of an arch-

angel among mortals in the walks of science. Shall we expect this rare power in the common people? But the ambitious preacher on insulated texts, if he is a correct logician, holds up his one main proposition throughout his sermon, and elaborates it with a pertinacity which is insufferable to the untrained mind. (If he is not a correct logician, then the case is still worse.) But when connected subject follows subject with a pleasing variety, the attention is relieved and the curiosity pleasantly stimulated.

The only real obstacle to the interest of the hearer is one which may be removed by a simple expedient. It is too great a tax to the memory and attention to comprehend a criticism and exposition of an extended passage which has been only heard once or twice. For the comprehension of the exegetical argument requires a distinct view of the very words, often, on which the preacher remarks. Let, then, every worshipper bring his Bible with him to Church, and keep it open before him. This was always done by our forefathers, who knew and valued expository preaching. The Church is the school of Christ; a school without its text-books is a sorry affair. If our conception of preaching were correct, nothing could appear more preposterous than that sight which is now usually witnessed among us—a whole assemblage of pupils without a single Bible, save that in the teacher's hands! If you will insist when you become pastors that your people shall bring their Bibles to Church, you will, in that simple measure, work a precious reform.

There is a yet higher reason, which guarantees the power of good expository preaching over the souls of

the hearers. It presents divine truth in those aspects and relations in which it was placed by that God who knew what was in man. We, in our self-sufficiency, detach a cardinal truth from its context; we exactly define our proposition; we discard the argument by which the Holy Ghost has seen fit to sustain it; we construct another, recasting the elements of proof in forms dialectical or theological, according to the rules of our human science. The effects always disappoint us. Our discourses have far less power over the conscience than we hoped. The ignorant may gape after what they suppose our wondrous learning and logic; the educated may applaud the regularity and art of our discussion; yet souls are not awakened. But now let the preacher humbly take the same gospel proposition in its context. Let him make all his human learning ancillary to the simple work of ascertaining and explaining the argument of the Holy Spirit. Let him drink into the very meaning and temper of that inspired discussion. And let him do nothing else but place it, without change or addition, in contact with the souls of his hearers. He will find with delight that he has now opened a way to their hearts. God's sermons will tell upon them as men's sermons never do. Your conceit and ambition may persuade you that your human arrangement is more regular, more logical, more complete than his. He knows better, for he is omniscient. Have faith and humility to trust his truth in his own biblical forms, and you will find your sermons clothed with a true power and unction. If you thus honour his word, he will honour your ministry with success.

The second, and, I surmise, the decisive, obstacle to

expository preaching in our day is the indolence and incapacity of preachers. In truth, to get up a human oration upon some point of Christian doctrine or ethics, embodying a few commonplaces made ready to our hands by books, and concealing our platitudes under the forms of a regular discussion, is comparatively easy. To expound aright requires the highest taste, judgment, experience and learning. I avow, young gentlemen, that it is not easy to apprehend exactly the mental wants of those whom you would instruct, so as to give just the explanations which are german, to conceive correctly the precise scope of the Holy Ghost in the passage; to state this perspicuously to the common reason; to evince the correspondence of your statements with the very mind of the Spirit by a plain, homely, exegetical logic without pedantry, which shall be clear and convincing to common sense; to apply the truth to heart and conscience; to select the most appropriate and useful inferences; to preserve throughout the "analogy of the faith," and to superfuse the whole with evangelical warmth,—this is not easy. But if it be well done, it will prove "the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation."

By some an objection is raised against expository preaching, that it is less consistent with the purposes of oratory, because of its lack of unity. This virtue, we shall see, is a cardinal trait of the oration. But, it is urged, if the speaker passes over a large portion of Scripture, explaining the whole with its variety of subjects, unity is lost. Now this objection is founded on the assumption, which is untrue, that the Scriptures themselves lack rhetorical unity. They readily divide

themselves into sections, each of which contains some one dominant scope. We find such a natural section sometimes in a narrative designed by the Holy Spirit to exemplify some virtue or cluster of virtues; sometimes in a parable or series of parables illustrating one main truth; sometimes in a doctrinal discussion. Why may not the "workman rightly dividing the word of truth" select one of these parts, bounded by its natural limits, as the text of his discourse? Then, inasmuch as the passage has its own unity, his exposition will be the more truly rhetorical as it is the more faithful. There are a few parts of the Scripture, as the one hundred and nineteenth Psalm and the Proverbs, which seem not to admit this division, because each verse introduces a separate maxim or sentiment. But even in these a more thorough consideration will detect a connecting clue. Of the one hundred and nineteenth Psalm, Dr. Thomas Scott has said, that it is not a golden chain, but a box of separate golden rings. Yet examine, for example, the first part, ALEPH; you will find that amidst the rapid transitions there is a prevalent subject, conformity to God's will. Verses first and second declare the blessedness and characteristics of this grace. Verse fourth refers to that divine authority from which the obligation to it flows. Verse fifth expresses that aspiration after it which is the response of the Christian heart to the announcement of this divine command. The sixth and seventh verses give a fuller expression to this sacred longing. And verse eighth concludes the thought of the section, with strict rhetorical propriety, by a practical vow of conformity to the divine will, and a prayer for the aid and forbearance of God in the imperfect endeavour.

But, in fine, is it proved that all the pastor's instructions must needs be rhetorical? True, the regular sermon is a sacred oration, and I define the oration as a discourse always converging to a practical end. But may not the pastor have public teaching functions, which are homiletical rather than rhetorical? In this humbler department of his work, then, there may be appropriate places for expositions which even resist reduction to a complete unity.¹

¹ See, on this whole subject, "Thoughts on Preaching," by Dr. J. W. Alexander. It is gratifying to find nearly all the positions and arguments of this lecture, which I had regularly delivered to my classes several years before the death of this eminent and useful pastor, affirmed in his posthumous work.