

Articles and Sermons :: EARNESTNESS IN THE MANNER OF PREACHING-James**EARNESTNESS IN THE MANNER OF PREACHING-James - posted by hmmhmm (), on: 2007/3/15 15:34**

John Angell James, 1847

I now pass from matter of preaching, to manner of preaching—*and when I say manner, I wish to be understood as including in that term, not simply the method of communicating truth by voice and gesture—but the cast of thought and the style of composition in reference to the truth enunciated.* What is needed for the pulpit is a vivacious, in opposition to a stiff, formal, and dull, method. Style must of course, to a considerable extent, vary with the subject matter, and be regulated by it. In exegetical preaching, or in that part of a sermon which is merely expository, all that is required is calm perspicuity and a flow of clear, simple, quiet thought—which shall instruct the understanding, and gently draw after it the heart, without being intended or expected in any great degree to move the passions. We have some beautiful specimens of this in the elegant discourses of Dr. Wardlaw. Well would it be if, after his manner, we could be clear without being pedantic; exegetical without being scholastic; and invest exposition with charms which would make it attractive to all our congregations.

But though a careful analysis of the text should form the basis of almost all our sermons, there must be something more than mere exegesis, however clear, correct, and instructive. We have to do not only with a dark intellect that needs to be informed—but with a hard heart that needs to be impressed, and a torpid conscience that needs to be awakened! We have to make our hearers feel that in the great business of godliness, there is much to be done—as well as much to be known. We must impart knowledge, for light is as essential to the growth of piety in the spiritual world, as it is to the growth of vegetation in the natural one. The analogy holds good in another point, we must not only let in light—but add great and vigorous labor to carry on the culture. We must therefore rise from exegesis into—exhortation, warning, and admonition. The apostle's manner is the right one, "Whom we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." We must not only direct—but impel our hearers. They all know far more than they practice of the Bible—the head is generally far in advance of the heart; and our great business is to persuade, to entreat, to beseech. We have to deal with a dead, heavy, lethargic mind! Yes more, we have to overcome a stout resistance, and to move a reluctant heart!

If all that was necessary to secure the ends of our ministry were to lay the truth before the mind; if the heart were pre-disposed to the subject of our preaching, then like the lecturer on science, we might dispense with the hortatory manner, and confine ourselves exclusively to explanation. Logic unaccompanied by rhetoric would then suffice. But when we find every sinner we address, acting in opposition to the dictates of his judgment, and the warnings of his conscience, as well as to the testimony of Scripture; sacrificing the interests of his immortal soul to the vanities of the world, and the corruptions of his heart; madly bent upon his ruin, and rushing to the precipice from which he will take a fatal leap into perdition; can we, in that case, be satisfied with merely explaining, however clearly, and demonstrating, however conclusively, the truths of Scripture?

Would we think it enough coldly to unfold the sin of suicide, and logically to arrange the proofs of its criminality, before the man who had in his hand the pistol or the poison with which he was just about to destroy himself? Would a definition of the sin, however clear and accurate, be enough in this case? Would we not entreat, expostulate, beseech? Would we not lay hold of the arm uplifted for self-destruction, or snatch the poison cup from the hand that was about to apply it to the lip? What are the impenitent sinners to whom we preach—but individuals bent upon self-destruction, not indeed the destruction of their bodies—but of their souls? There they are before our eyes, rushing in their sins and their impenitence to the precipice that overhangs the pit of destruction; and shall we content ourselves with sermons, which however excellent they may be for elegance, for logic, for perspicuity, and even for evangelism, have no hortatory power, no moving tendency, none of the apostle's beseeching entreaty? Shall we merely lecture on theology, and deal out religious theories, to men, who with a flood of light already pouring over them, care for none of these things?

It is a question of not a little difficulty, how far the rules and methods of secular eloquence may be observed in the composition of sermons. The language of the apostle in reference to his own preaching, has been thought to forbid all elabora

tion; "Christ sent me to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." A right understanding of his circumstances and ours, will show us that there are differences which forbid too rigid and literal an application of this sentiment to our own case. Miracles gave a potency to his preaching, which is lacking in ours. Besides, the wisdom here forbidden was not the selection of the best words, and placing them in the best order for the statement of divine truth—but that combination of false philosophy and artificial rhetoric which were the usual practice of the Grecian schools; what he forbade was such a method of setting forth evangelical doctrine as would have brought it into conformity, both as to matter and manner, with the fashionable systems of philosophy. Provided the effect of elaboration is to make a sermon at once perspicuous and impressive, to give it power to command the attention, and at the same time to instruct the judgment, engage the affections, and awaken the conscience; to render the subject clearly understood, and at the same time deeply felt, it cannot be too perfect.

No preparation which causes the hearer to forget the preacher, and to think only of himself and the subject; which rivets attention, and makes every one feel that he is in the presence not only of man—but of God; which declares the way of salvation so clearly that the most obtuse understanding can comprehend it, and at the same time so forcibly and touchingly that the dullest heart must feel it—cannot be wrong. If a preacher of the power of Demosthenes were to arise, he would, and must, carry that power into the pulpit, and ought to do so.

But on the other hand, an elaboration which makes it but too evident to every serious and observant mind that it was the preacher's aim not to convert souls—but to catch the applause of the fashionable, the giddy, and the frivolous; which fills the discourse with flowery diction and gaudy metaphors, with elegant declamations, or startling figures, with fanciful descriptions, and beautiful pictures; which though it takes the cross for its subject, almost instantly leaves it and runs into the fields of poetry or the labyrinths of philosophy, for subtle arguments, or sparkling and splendid illustrations; which to sum up all, exercises the judgment or amuses the imagination—but never moves the heart, or calls the conscience to discharge its severe and solemn functions—such preaching may render a minister popular, secure him large congregations, and procure for him the plaudits of the multitude; but where are the sinners converted from the error of their way, and the souls saved from death? Verily if such a preacher has his reward only in the applause of the multitude, whose object and aim were as low as his own, it was what he sought, and all he sought, and let him not complain if he gains this, and nothing else. From such preachers may God Almighty preserve our churches, and may he give us men who better know their business in the pulpit, and better do it!

A simple style—as opposed to an artificial and rhetorical style—is then essential to earnestness; for who can believe that man to be intent on saving souls, who seems to have labored in his study only to make his sermon as fine as glittering imagery and high sounding diction could render it. I could as soon believe a physician to be intent on saving his fellow-creatures from death, who, when the plague was sweeping them into the grave, spent his time in scattering over his patients flowers or perfumes, or writing his prescriptions in beautiful characters and classical latin.

Affectation is bad enough anywhere; in the pulpit it is intolerable.

'Reasons' are the pillars of the fabric of a sermon—but 'illustrations' are the windows which give the best light.

"If we were compelled to give a brief definition of the truest style of eloquence, we should say it was 'practical reasoning,' animated by strong emotion; or if we might be indulged in what is rather a description than a definition of it, we should say that it consisted in reasoning on topics calculated to inspire a common interest, expressed in the language of ordinary life, and in that brief, rapid, familiar style, which natural emotion ever assumes. The former half of this description would condemn no small portion of the compositions called sermons, and the latter half a still larger portion.

"We would not be misunderstood. It is far, very far, from our intention to speak in terms of the slightest depreciation of the immense treasures of learning, of acute learning, of profound imagination, of powerful controversy, which the literature of the English pulpit exemplifies. In these points it cannot be surpassed. In vigor and originality of thought, in argumentative power, in extensive and varied erudition, it as far transcends all other literature of the same kind, as it is deficient in the qualities which are fitted to produce popular impression. We merely assert that the greater part of 'sermons' are not at all entitled to the name, if by it be meant discourses especially adapted to the object of instructing, convincing, or persuading the common mind."

After some admirably judicious remarks on the topics of the pulpit, designed to prove that these should be such as are calculated to inspire a common interest in the mass of a common audience, the writer goes on to speak of the manner of discussing them, and observes—

"Where the topics are not such as are fairly open to censure, a large class of preachers, especially among the young, grievously err by investing them with the technicalities of science and philosophy; either because they foolishly suppose they thereby give their compositions a more philosophical air, or because they disdain the homely and the ordinary."

So harmonious are the judgments, on the best style of preaching, of two writers belonging to very different schools of literature and religion, whose keen sarcasm it may be hoped will correct the pedantry at which it is aimed, and convince many an 'ambitious aspirant after popularity' that whatever methods may secure the applause of the frivolous and the ignorant—simplicity is the only way to attain usefulness and to secure the approbation of the serious, the wise, and the godly. An affectation of learning and science in the pulpit, is not only a sin against good taste—but betrays an utter lack of that watching for immortal souls, which is or ought to be, the preacher's steady and constant aim. To borrow the homely—but forcible language of Doolittle,

"The eyeing of eternity should make us ministers painful and diligent in our studies to prepare a message of such weight as we come about, when preaching to men concerning everlasting matters, and should especially move us to be plain in our speech, that even the capacity of the weakest in the congregation, that has an eternal soul that must be damned or saved, might understand in things necessary to salvation, what we mean, and aim, and drive at. It has made me tremble to hear some soar aloft, that knowing men might praise their 'abilities', while the common people are kept from the knowledge of it; and put their matter in such a dress of words, in such a style, so composed, that the most stand looking at the preacher in the face, and hear a sound—but know not what he says; and while he does pretend to feed them, does indeed starve them. Would a man of any compassion go from a prince to a condemned man, and tell him in such a language that he should not understand the condition upon which the prince would pardon him, and then the poor man lose his life because the proud and haughty messenger must show his cleverness in delivering his message in polished English, which the condemned man could not understand?"

I shall introduce here a quotation from that great master of chaste eloquence, Robert Hall; whose opinion on any subject—but especially on that of the art of preaching, in which he was himself so extraordinary a proficient, is entitled to peculiar deference.

"A great diversity of talents must be expected to be found among the evangelical clergy. As they are called for the most part, to address the middle and lower classes of society, their language is plain and simple—speaking in the presence of God, their address is solemn; and, 'as becomes the ambassadors of Christ,' their appeals to the conscience are close and cogent. Few, if any, among them aspire to the praise of learned orators—a character which we despair of ever seeing associated, in high perfection, with that of a Christian teacher. The minister of the gospel is called to declare the testimony of God, which is always weakened by a profuse employment of the ornaments of secular eloquence. Those exquisite paintings and nice touches of art, in which the sermons of the French preachers excel so much, excite a kind of attention, and produce a species of pleasure, not in perfect accordance with devotional feeling. The imagination is too much excited and employed, not to interfere with the more awful functions of conscience; the hearer is absorbed in admiration for the preacher, and the exercise which ought to be an instrument of conviction, becomes a feast of taste. In the hand of a Massillon, the subject of death itself is blended with so many associations of the most delicate kind, and calls up so many sentiments of natural tenderness, as to become a source of theatrical amusement, rather than of holy sensibility. Without being insensible to the charms of eloquence, it is our decided opinion that a sermon of Mr. Gisborne's is more calculated to 'convert a sinner from the error of his way,' than one of Massillon's. It is a strong objection to a studied attempt at oratory in the pulpit, that it usually induces a neglect of the peculiar doctrines of Christian truth, where the preacher feels himself restrained, and is under the necessity of explaining texts, of obviating objections, and elucidating difficulties, which limit the excursions of imagination, and confine it within narrow bounds. He is therefore eager to escape from these fetters, and, instead of 'reasoning out of the Scriptures,' expatiates in the flowery fields of declamation."

A lack of powerful, eloquent, yet simple and sincere exhortation—is among the greatest deficiencies of the modern pulpit. Let any one read the sermons of our great nonconformist predecessors, Clarkson, Doolittle, Manton, Howe, Owen, Bates, Flavel, and especially Baxter, and mark the all but overwhelming force of persuasion which is put forth in the application of their discourses; let him see how these great men exerted the mightiness of their strength to make all they said to the judgment, reach the heart and awaken the conscience. And to come to more modern times, let him read the sermons of Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards, and Davies of New Jersey; and to advance to still more modern productions, let him peruse the sermons of Parsons, Chalmers, and the best preachers on the other side of the Atlantic, Spring, Barnes, Skinner, Beecher, Griffin, Clarke, and Sprague—also Robert Hall's sermon on "Marks of Love to God," and Bradley's sermon on "Our Lamps are Gone Out," for fine specimens of this hortatory method; this bearing down with the whole power of the truth on the sinner's heart and conscience; this beseeching men to be reconciled to God. Some specimens of this method will be given in the following chapter.

This is earnestness in preaching—when it is evident to the hearer that the preacher feels the truths he discusses; when it is manifest to all that he believes what he says, in affirming that his hearers are sinking into perdition, and that he is laboring to persuade them to forsake their evil courses—when his sermons are full of close, pointed, personal addresses; when, in short, through the whole discourse, he is seen moving onward from the understanding to a closer and closer approximation to the heart in the conclusion, and the hearer feels at length his hand seizing him with a mysterious and irresistible power, and bearing him away, almost whether he will or not—to Christ, salvation, and heaven. The conviction of the judgment is not the ultimate object of good preaching; though it is the chief, if not the exclusive end of some preachers, if we are to judge by their manner of preaching; but they ought to know that the persuasion of the heart does not follow as a matter of course; that has still to be effected, and they have to undertake it as a distinct purpose, and to aim at it with a different sort of skill, and with a different instrumentality from that by which they chiefly work. 'Compel them to come in', was the method prescribed to the servants of the Lord who made a great feast, and sent out his invitations to the poor and needy. It is this compulsion we lack; this earnest entreaty, this laying hold of the sinner, and making him feel that his salvation is with us an object of intense desire—and that we shall be bitterly disappointed if it is not accomplished.