

## Historical Reflection

# “Sermons – Their Matter”

by Charles Haddon Spurgeon



*SERMONS* should have real teaching in them, and their doctrine should be solid, substantial, and abundant. We do not enter the pulpit to talk for talk's sake; we have instructions to convey important to the last degree, and we cannot afford to utter pretty nothings. Our range of subjects is all but boundless, and we cannot, therefore, be excused if our discourses are threadbare and devoid of substance. If we speak as ambassadors for God, we need never complain of want of matter, for our message is full to overflowing. The entire gospel must be presented from the pulpit; the whole faith once delivered to the saints must be proclaimed by us. The truth as it is in Jesus must be instructively declared, so that the people may not merely hear, but know, the joyful sound. We serve not at the altar of "the unknown God," but we speak to the worshippers of him of whom it is written, "they that know thy name will put their- tract in thee." To divide a sermon well may be a very useful art, but how if there is nothing to divide? A mere division maker is like an excellent carver with an empty dish before him. To be able to deliver an exordium which shall be appropriate and attractive, to be at ease in speaking with propriety during the time allotted for the discourse, and to wind up with a respectable peroration, may appear to mere religious performers to be all that is requisite; but the true minister of Christ knows that the true value of a sermon must lie, not in its fashion and manner, but in the truth which it contains. Nothing can compensate for the absence of teaching; all the rhetoric in the world is but as chaff to the wheat, in contrast to the gospel of our salvation. However beautiful the sower's basket it is a miserable mockery if it be without seed. The grandest discourse ever delivered is an ostentatious failure if the doctrine of the grace of God be absent from it; it sweeps over men's heads like a cloud, but it distributes no rain upon the thirsty earth; and therefore the remembrance of it to souls taught wisdom by an experience of pressing need is one of disappointment, or worse. A man's style may be as fascinating as that of the authoress of whom one said, "that she should write with a crystal pen dipped in dew upon silver paper, and use for pounce the dust of a butterfly's wing"; but to an audience whose souls are in instant jeopardy, what will mere elegance be but "altogether lighter than vanity"?

Horses are not to be judged by their bells or their trappings, but by limb and bone and blood; and sermons, when criticized by judicious hearers, are largely measured by the amount of gospel truth and force of gospel spirit which they contain. Brethren, weigh your sermons. Do not retail them by the yard, but deal them out by the pound. Set no store by the quantity of words which you utter, but strive to be esteemed for the quality of your matter. It is foolish to be lavish in words and niggardly in truth. He must be very destitute of wit who would be pleased to hear himself described after the manner of the world's great poet, who says, "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice: his reasons are as two grains of wheat hidden in two bushels of chaff; you shall seek all day ere you find them; and when you have them they are not worth the search."

Rousing appeals to the affections are excellent, but if they are not backed up by instruction they are a mere flash in the pan, powder consumed and no shot sent home. Rest assured that the most fervid revivalism will wear itself out in mere smoke, if it be not maintained by the fuel of teaching. The divine method is to put the law in the mind, and then write it on the heart; the judgment is enlightened, and then the passions subdued. Read Hebrews viii. 10, and follow the model of the covenant of grace. Gouge's

note on that place may with fitness be quoted here: "Ministers are herein to imitate God, and, to their best endeavor, to instruct people in the mysteries of godliness, and to teach them what to believe and practice, and then to stir them up in act and deed, to do what they are instructed to do. Their labor otherwise is like to be in vain. Neglect of this course is a main cause that men fall into many errors as they do in these days." I may add that this last remark has gained more force in our times; it is among uninstructed flocks that the wolves of popery make havoc; sound teaching is the best protection from the heresies which ravage right and left among us.

Sound information on scriptural subjects your hearers crave for, and must have. Accurate explanations of Holy Scripture they are entitled to, and if you are "an interpreter, on of a thousand," a real messenger of heaven, you will yield them plenteously. Whatever else may be present, the absence of edifying, instructive truth, like the absence of flour from bread, will be fatal. Estimated by their solid contents rather than their superficial area, many sermons are very poor specimens of godly discourse. I believe the remark is too well grounded that if you attend to a lecturer on astronomy or geology, during a short course you will obtain a tolerably clear view of his system; but if you listen, not only for twelve months, but for twelve years, to the common run of preachers, you will not arrive at any-thing like an idea of their system of theology. If it be so, it is a grievous fault, which cannot be too much deplored. Alas! the indistinct utterances of many concerning the grandest of eternal realities, and the dimness of thought in others with regard to fundamental truths, have given too much occasion for the criticism! Brethren, if you are not theologians you are in your pastorates just nothing at all. You may be fine rhetoricians, and be rich in polished sentences; but without knowledge of the gospel, and aptness to teach it, you are but a sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. Verbiage is too often the fig-leaf which does duty as a covering for theological ignorance. Sounding periods are offered instead of sound doctrine, and rhetorical flourishes in the place of robust thought. Such things ought not to be. The abounding of empty declamation, and the absence of food for the soul, will turn a pulpit into a box of bombast, and inspire contempt instead of reverence. Unless we are instructive preachers, and really feed the people, we may be great quoters of elegant poetry, and mighty retailers of second-hand windbags, but we shall be like Nero of old, fiddling while Rome was burning, and sending vessels to Alexandria to fetch sand for the arena while the populace starved for want of corn.

We insist upon it, that there must be abundance of matter in sermons, and next, that this matter must be congruous to the text. The discourse should spring out of the text as a rule, and the more evidently it does so the better; but at all times, to say the least, it should have a very close relationship thereto. In the matter of spiritualizing and accommodation very large latitude is to be allowed; but liberty must not degenerate into license, and there must always be a connection, and something more than a remote connection—a real relationship between the sermon and its text. I heard the other day of a remarkable text, which was appropriate or inappropriate, as you may think. A squire of a parish had given away a number of flaming scarlet cloaks to the oldest matrons of the parish. These resplendent beings were required to attend the parish church on the following Sunday, and to sit in front of the pulpit, from which one of the avowed successors of the apostles edified the saints from the words, "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." It is reported that on a subsequent occasion, when the same benefactor of the parish had given a bushel of potatoes to every man who had a family, the topic on the following Sunday was, "And they said, It is manna." I can-not tell whether the matter in that case was congruous to the selection of the text; I suppose it may have been, for the probabilities are that the whole performance was foolish throughout. Some brethren have done with their text as soon as they have read it. Having paid all due honor to that particular passage by announcing it, they feel no necessity further to refer to it. They touch their hats, as it were, to that part of Scripture, and pass on to fresh fields and pastures new. Why do such men take a text at all? Why limit their own glorious liberty? Why make Scripture a horsing-block by which to mount upon their unbridled Pegasus? Surely the words of inspiration were never meant to be boot-hooks to help a Talkative to draw on his seven-leagued boots in which to leap from pole to pole.

The surest way to maintain variety is to keep to the mind of the Holy Spirit in the particular passage under consideration. No two texts are exactly similar; some-thing in the connection or drift of the passage gives to each apparently identical text a shade of difference. Seep to the Spirit's track and you will never repeat yourself or be short of matter: his paths drop fatness. A sermon, moreover, comes with far greater power to the conscience of the hearers when it is plainly the very word of God—not a lecture about the Scripture, but Scripture itself opened up and enforced. It is due to the majesty of inspiration that when you profess to be preaching from a verse you do not thrust it out of sight to make room for your own thinkings.

Brethren, if you are in the habit of keeping to the precise sense of the Scripture before you, I will further recommend you to hold to the *ipsissima verba*, the very words of the Holy Ghost; for, although in many cases topical sermons are not only allowable, but very proper, those sermons which expound the exact words of the Holy Spirit are the most useful and the most agreeable to the major part of our congregations. They love to have the words themselves explained and expounded. The many are not always sufficiently capable of grasping the sense apart from the language—of gazing, so to speak, upon the truth disembodied; but when they hear the precise words reiterated again and again, and each expression dwelt upon after the manner of such preachers as Mr. Jay, of Bath, they are more edified, and the truth fixes itself more firmly upon their memories. Let your matter, then, be copious, and let it grow out of the inspired word, as violets and primroses spring up naturally from the sod, or as the virgin honey drops from the comb.

*Take care that your deliverances are always weighty, and fill of really important teaching.* Build not with wood, hay, mid stubble, but with gold, silver, and precious stones. It is scarcely needful to warn you against the grosser degradations of pulpit eloquence, or the example of the notorious orator Henley might be instanced. That loquacious adventurer, whom Pope has immortalized in his "Dunciad," was wont to make the passing events of the week the themes of his buffoonery on week days, and theological subjects suffered the same fate on Sundays. His forte lay in his low wit and in tuning his voice and balancing his hands. The satirist says of him, "How fluent nonsense trickles from his tongue." Gentlemen, it were better never to have been born, than to have the like truthfully said of us; we are on peril of our souls bound to deal with the solemnities of eternity and with no earth-born topics. There are, however, other and more inviting methods of wood and hay-building, and it behooves you not to be duped by them. This remark is necessary, especially to those gentlemen who mistake high-flying sentences for eloquence, and latinized utterances for great depth of thought. Certain homiletical instructors, by their example, if not by their precepts, encourage rhodomontade and great swelling words, and, therefore, are most perilous to young preachers. Think of a discourse commencing with such an amazing and stupendous assertion as the following, which by its native grandeur will strike you at once with a sense of the sublime and beautiful: "MAN IS MORAL." This genius might have added, "A cat has four feet." There would have been as much novelty in the one information as the other. I remember a sermon by a would-be profound writer which quite stunned the reader with grenadier words of six-foot length, but which, when properly boiled down, came to as much essence of meat as this—Man has a soul, his soul will live in another world, and therefore he should take care that it occupies a happy place. No one can object to the teaching, but it is not so novel as to need a blast of trumpets and a procession of bedizened phrases to introduce it to public attention. The art of saying commonplace things elegantly, pompously, grandiloquently, bombastically, is not lost among us, although its utter extinction were "a consummation devoutly to be wished." Sermons of this sort have been held up as models, and yet they are mere bits of bladder which would lie on your finger-nail, blown out until they remind you of those colored balloons which itinerant dealers carry about the streets to sell at a halfpenny a-piece for the delectation of the extremely juvenile; the parallel, I am sorry to say, holding good a little further, for in some cases these discourses contain just a tinge of poison by way of coloring, which some of the weaker sort have found out to their cost. It is infamous to ascend your pulpit and pour over your people rivers of language, cataracts of words, in which mere platitudes are held in solution like infinitesimal grains of homoeopathic medicine in an Atlantic of utterance. Better far give the people masses of unprepared truth in the rough, like pieces of meat from a butcher's block, chopped off any-how, bone and all, and even dropped down in

the saw-dust, than ostentatiously hand them out upon a china dish a delicious slice of nothing at all, decorated with the parsley of poetry, and flavored with the sauce of affectation.

It will be a happy circumstance if you are so guided by the Holy Spirit as to *give a clear testimony to all the doctrines which constitute or lie around the gospel*. No truth is to be kept back. The doctrine of reserve, so detestable in the mouths of Jesuits, is not one whit the less villainous when accepted by Protestants. It is not true that some doctrines are only for the initiated; there is nothing in the Bible which is ashamed of the light. The sublimest views of divine sovereignty have a practical bearing, and are not, as some think, mere metaphysical subtleties; the distinctive utterances of Calvinism have their bearing upon every-day life and ordinary experience, and if you hold such views, or the opposite, you have no dispensation permitting you to conceal your beliefs. Cautious reticence is, in nine cases out of ten, cowardly betrayal. The best policy is never to be politic, but to proclaim every atom of the truth so far as God has taught it to you. Harmony requires that the voice of one doctrine shall not drown the rest, and it also demands that the gentler notes shall not be omitted because of the greater volume of other sounds. Every note appointed by the great minstrel must be sounded, each note having its own proportionate power and emphasis, the passage marked with forte must not be softened, and those with piano must not be rolled out like thunder, but each must have its due hearing. All revealed truth in harmonious proportion must be your theme.

Brethren, if you resolve in your pulpit utterances to deal with important verities, *you must not for ever hover around the mere angles of truth*. Those doctrines which are not vital to the soul's salvation, nor even essential to practical Christianity, are not to be considered upon every occasion of worship. Bring in all the features of truth in due proportion, for every part of Scripture is profitable, and you are not only to preach the truth, but the whole truth. Do not insist perpetually upon one truth alone. A nose is an important feature in the human countenance, put to paint a man's nose alone is not a satisfactory method of taking his likeness: a doctrine may be very important, but an exaggerated estimate of it may be fatal to an harmonious and complete ministry. Do not make minor doctrines main points. Do not paint the details of the background of the gospel picture with the same heavy brush as the great objects in the foreground of it. For instance, the great problems of sublapsarianism and supralapsarianism, the trenchant debates concerning eternal filiation, the earnest dispute concerning the double procession, and the pre or post millenarian schemes, however important some may deem them, are practically of very little concern to that godly widow woman, with seven children to support by her needle, who wants far more to hear of the loving-kindness of the God of providence than of these mysteries profound; if you preach to her on the faithfulness of God to his people, she will be cheered and helped in the battle of life; but difficult questions will perplex her or send her to sleep. She is, however, the type of hundreds of those who most require your care. Our great master theme is the good news from heaven; the tidings of mercy through the atoning death of Jesus, mercy to the chief of sinners upon their believing in Jesus.

We must throw all our strength of judgment, memory, imagination, and eloquence into the delivery of the gospel; and not give to the preaching of the cross our random thoughts while wayside topics engross our deeper meditations. Depend upon it, if we brought the intellect of a Locke or a Newton, and the eloquence of a Cicero, to bear upon the simple doctrine of "believe and live," we should find no surplus strength. Brethren, first and above all things, keep to plain evangelical doctrines; whatever else you do or do not preach, be sure incessantly to bring forth the soul-saving truth of Christ and him crucified. I know a minister whose shoo-latchet I am unworthy to unloose, whose preaching is often little better than sacred miniature painting—I might almost say holy trifling. He is great upon the ten toes of the beast, the four faces of the cherubim, the mystical meaning of badgers' skins, and the typical bearings of the staves of the ark and the windows of Solomon's temple: but the sins of business men, the temptations of the times, and the needs of the age, he scarcely ever touches upon. Such preaching reminds me of a lion engaged in mouse-hunting, or a man-of-war cruising after a lost water-butt. Topics scarcely in importance equal to what Peter calls "old wives' fables," are made great matters of by those microscopic divines to whom the nicety of a point is more attractive than the saving of souls. You will have read in Todd's " Student's

Manual" that Harcatius, king of Persia, was a notable mole-catcher; and Briantes, king of Lydia, was equally *au fait* at filing needles; but these trivialities by no means prove them to have been great kings: it is much the same in the ministry, there is such a thing as meanness of mental occupation unbecoming the rank of an ambassador of heaven.

Among a certain order of minds at this time the Athenian desire of telling or hearing some new thing appears to be predominant. They boast of new light, and claim a species of inspiration which warrants them in condemning all who are out of their brotherhood, and yet their grand revelation relates to a mere circumstantial of worship, or to an obscure interpretation of prophecy; so that, at sight of their great fuss and loud cry concerning so little, we are reminded of

"Ocean into tempest toss'd  
To waft a feather or to drown a fly."

Worse still are those who waste time in insinuating doubts concerning the authenticity of texts, or the correctness of Biblical statements concerning natural phenomena. Painfully do I call to mind hearing, one Sabbath evening, a deliverance called a sermon, of which the theme was a clever inquiry as to whether an angel did actually descend, and stir the pool at Bethesda, or whether it was an intermitting spring, concerning which Jewish superstition had invented a legend. Dying men and women were assembled to hear the way of salvation, and they were put off with such vanity as this! They came for bread, and received a stone; the sheep looked up to the shepherd, and were not fed. Seldom do I hear a sermon, and when I do I am grievously unfortunate, for one of the last I was entertained with was intended to be a justification of Joshua for destroying the Canaanites, and another went to prove that it was not good for man to be alone. How many souls were converted in answer to the prayers before these sermons I have never been able to ascertain, but I shrewdly suspect that no unusual rejoicing disturbed the serenity of the golden streets.

Believing my next remark to be almost universally unneeded, I bring it forward with diffidence -- *do not over-load a sermon with too much matter*. All truth is not to be comprised in one discourse. Sermons are not to be bodies of divinity. There is such a thing as having too much to say, and saying it till hearers are sent home loathing rather than longing. An old minister walking with a young preacher, pointed to a cornfield, and observed, "Your last sermon had too much in it, and it was not clear enough, or sufficiently well-arranged; it was like that field of wheat, it contained much crude food, but none fit for use. You should make your sermons like a loaf of bread, fit for eating; and in convenient form." It is to be feared that human heads (speaking phrenologically) are not so capacious for theology as they once were, for our forefathers rejoiced in sixteen ounces of divinity, undiluted and unadorned, and could continue receiving it for three or four hours at a stretch, but our more degenerate, or perhaps more busy, generation requires about an ounce of doctrine at a time, and that must be the concentrated extract or essential oil, rather than the entire substance of divinity. We must in these times say a great deal in a few words, but not too much, nor with too much amplification. One thought fixed on the mind will be better than fifty thoughts made to flit across the ear. One tenpenny nail driven home and clenched will be more useful than a score of tin-tacks loosely fixed, to be pulled out again in an hour.

*Our matter should be well arranged* according to the true rules of mental architecture. Nor practical inferences at the basis and doctrines as the topstones; not metaphors in the foundations, and propositions at the summit; not the more important truths first and the minor teaches last, after the manner of an anticlimax; but the thought must climb and ascend; one stair of teaching leading to another one door of reasoning conducting to another, and the whole elevating the hearer to a chamber from whose windows truth is seen gleaming in the light of God. In preaching, have a place for everything, and everything in its place. Never suffer truths to fall from you pell-mell. Do not let your thoughts rush as a mob, but make them march as a troop of soldiery. Order, which is heaven's first law, must not be neglected by heaven's ambassadors.

*Your doctrinal teaching should be clear and unmistakable.* To be so it must first of all be clear to yourself. Some men think in smoke and preach in a cloud. Your people do not want a luminous haze, but the solid *terra firma* of truth. Philosophical speculations put certain minds into a semi-intoxicated condition, in which they either see everything double, or see nothing at all. The head of a certain college in Oxford was years ago asked by a stranger what was the motto of the arms of that university. He told him that it was "*Dominus illuminatio mea.*" But he also candidly informed the stranger that, in his private opinion, a motto more appropriate might be, "*Aristoteles mea tenebrae.*" Sensational writers have half crazed many honest men who have conscientiously read their lucubrations out of a notion that they ought to be abreast of the age, as if such a necessity might not also require us to attend the theatres in order to be able to judge the new plays, or frequent the turf that we might not be too bigoted in our opinions upon racing and gambling. For my part, I believe that the chief readers of heterodox books are ministers, and that if they would not notice them they would fall still-born from the press. Let a minister keep clear of mystifying himself, and then he is on the road to becoming intelligible to his people. No man can hope to be felt who cannot make himself understood. If we give our people refined truth, pure Scriptural doctrine, and all so worded as to have no needless obscurity about it, we shall be true shepherds of the sheep, and the profiting of our people will soon be apparent.

*Endeavor to keep the matter of your sermonizing as fresh as you can.* Do not rehearse five or six doctrines with unvarying monotony of repetition. Buy a theological barrel-organ, brethren, with five tunes accurately adjusted, and you will be qualified to practise as an ultra-Calvinistic preacher at Zoar and Jireh, if you also purchase at some vinegar factory a good supply of bitter, acrid abuse of Arminians, and duty-faith men. Brains and grace are optional, but the organ and the wormwood are indispensable. It is ours to perceive and rejoice in a wider range of truth. All that these good men hold of grace and sovereignty we maintain as firmly and boldly as they; but we dare not shut our eyes to other teachings of the word, and we feel bound to make full proof of our ministry, by declaring the whole counsel of God. With abundant themes diligently illustrated by fresh metaphors and experiences, we shall not weary, but, under God's hand, shall win our hearers' ears and hearts.

*Let your teachings grow and advance;* let them deepen with your experience, and rise with your soul-progress. I do not mean preach new truths; for, on the contrary, I hold that man happy who is so well taught from the first that, after fifty years of ministry, he has never had to recant a doctrine or to mourn an important omission; but I mean, let our depth and insight continually increase, and where there is spiritual advance it will be so. Timothy could not preach like Paul. Our earlier productions must be surpassed by those of our riper years: we must never make these our models; they will be best burned, or only preserved to be mourned over because of their superficial character. It were ill, indeed, if we knew no more after being many years in Christ's school; our progress may be slow, but progress there must be, or there will be cause to suspect that the inner life is lacking or sadly unhealthy. Set it before you as most certain that you have not yet attained, and may grace be given you to press forward towards that which is yet beyond. May you all become able ministers of the New Testament, and not a whit behind the very chief of preachers, though in yourselves you will still be nothing.

The word "sermon" is said to signify a *thrust*, and, therefore, in sermonizing it must be our aim to *use the subject in hand with energy and effect, and the subject must be capable of such employment.* To choose mere moral themes will be to use a wooden dagger; but the great truths of revelation are as sharp swords. Keep to doctrines which stir the conscience and the heart. Remain unwaveringly the champions of a soul-winning gospel. God's truth is adapted to man, and God's grace adapts man to it. There is a key which, under God, can wind up the musical box of man's nature; get it, and use it daily. Hence I urge you to keep to the old-fashioned gospel, and to that only, for assuredly it is the power of God unto salvation.

Of all I would wish to say this is the sum; my brethren, preach CHRIST, always and evermore. He is the whole gospel. His person, offices, and work must be our one great, all-comprehending theme. The world needs still to be told of its Saviour, and of the way to reach him. Justification by faith should be far more

than it is the daily testimony of Protestant pulpits; and if with this master-truth there should be more generally associated the other great doctrines of grace, the better for our churches and our age. If with the zeal of Methodists we can preach the doctrine of Puritans a great future is before us. The fire of Wesley, and the fuel of Whitfield, will cause a burning which shall set the forests of error on fire, and warm the very soul of this cold earth. We are not called to proclaim philosophy and metaphysics, but the simple gospel Man's fall, his need of a new birth, forgiveness through an atonement, and salvation as the result of faith, these are our battleaxes and weapons of war. We have enough to do to learn and teach these great truths, and accursed be that learning which shall divert us from our mission, or that wilful ignorance which shall cripple us in its pursuit. More and more am I jealous lest any views upon prophecy, church government, politics, or even systematic theology, should withdraw one of us from glorying in the cross of Christ. Salvation is a theme for which I would fain enlist every holy tongue. I am greedy after witnesses for the glorious gospel of the blessed God. O that Christ crucified were the universal burden of men of God. Your guess at the number of the beast, your Napoleonic speculations, your conjectures concerning a personal Antichrist—forgive me, I count them but mere bones for dogs; while men are dying, and hell is filling, it seems to me the veriest drivel to be muttering about an Armageddon at Sebastopol or Sadowa or Sedan, and peeping between the folded leaves of destiny to discover the fate of Germany. Blessed are they who read and hear the words of the prophecy of the Revelation, but the like blessing has evidently not fallen on those who pretend to expound it, for generation after generation of them have been proved to be in error by the mere lapse of time, and the present race will follow to the same inglorious sepulchre. I would sooner pluck one single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit is a more glorious achievement than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy as *Doctor Sufficentissimus*; to have faithfully unveiled the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will be in the final judgment accounted worthier service than to have solved the problems of the religious Sphinx, or to have cut the Gordian knot of apocalyptic difficulty. Blessed is that ministry of which CHRIST IS ALL.