

Pastor and People.

SCRIPTURAL PREACHING.

BY PRINCIPAL CAVEN, D.D.

Preaching is one of the principal instruments used by the Holy Spirit in establishing the kingdom of God. Hence the vast importance which attaches to preaching, and the obligation laid upon the Church to prevent its being in any way perverted or robbed of the qualities which are essential to its power and efficiency. The enemy, who is evermore and in every way seeking to molest the Church of God, will, doubtless, do his best to impair the ministry of the Word, and to turn preaching aside from its proper object. Nor need we be surprised should this be attempted skillfully, under colour of improving the instrument which he would mar or destroy. Should the object apparently be to make the pulpit wiser and more attractive, and to give it adaptation to the times, we have only to remember that the subtle adversary, whose hand we here discern, knows how to conceal his aim, and to transform himself into an angel of light.

Now, it will be allowed by all Christian people that preaching should have such characteristics that the epithet "Scriptural" could be properly applied to it. There can be no severer condemnation of preaching than to call it unscriptural, and if it be justly so characterized it cannot accomplish much real good, whatever temporary success may attend it. Unscriptural preaching will not be honoured with the fruit which is produced by a true and faithful ministry of the Word; and the more unreservedly we can apply the term scriptural to a ministry, the more likely are we to see large results of blessing from it.

PREACHING SHOULD BE SCRIPTURAL.

But what is involved in this axiomatic statement? It should be scriptural in matter and in manner, in substance and in form.

1. Preaching should be scriptural in matter. It aims at setting forth the truth of God as contained in the Scriptures. It deals with the great themes of Sin and Redemption, and has the same object which the Bible itself has, viz., to lead men to God, to guide their feet into the way of peace, and to prepare them for the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. As all Scripture is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," so also should preaching be. The renewal of men is accomplished by the truth, and by it alone, and hence the importance of presenting the truth as found in the unerring Word. Human wisdom can devise no substitute for the evangelical doctrine in securing this result, and every attempt to improve upon Scripture soon betrays its folly as well as its sinfulness.

(1) Nothing which is opposed to Scripture should enter into the matter of preaching. No doctrine or fact of Scripture must be controverted or denied by the preacher. Neither directly nor indirectly must this be done. The Bible is the preacher's authority, and the test and standard of his teaching, and should he put himself in opposition to it, he has deserted his place and his function. The Bible tells us that men are sinful and perishing; should the preacher declare the Fall a myth, and maintain the essential goodness of man, he is unscriptural. The Bible informs us that our sins are expiated by the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that we have acceptance and righteousness through Him alone; should the preacher make repentance, or good works, or any experience or virtue of ours the meritorious cause of salvation, he contravenes the Scriptures. The Bible declares the necessity of

REGENERATION BY THE SPIRIT

in order that any of Adam's children may enter the kingdom of God; the preacher gives the lie to Scripture should he maintain that, even in some instances, moral culture is sufficient for the development and perfection of virtuous character. The Bible affirms that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, is Himself God, being possessed of all divine attributes, and doing all that the Father does; should the Christ of a preacher be merely a good man and a prophet, even though a perfect man, Scripture is contradicted. I need not multiply illustrations. Up to the existence of a personal God there is probably not a doctrine of Scripture which has not been denied by some one who, nevertheless, claimed to teach the essential truth of the Bible; for it has been gravely and elaborately argued in our own day that the God of the Bible is the God of Pantheism, and that the fundamental error of theologians is the assumption of personality in God. We have, of course, many teachers of an advanced Christianity who acknowledge no submission to Scripture, but whilst adopting much of its ethics, and, according to it general praise, feel at liberty to differ from it, and to follow the religious consciousness or some other guide. Science, philosophy, historical criticism, etc., are by many regarded as correctives of Scripture, and to them appeal from the Word of God is confidently taken. This seems to be the present attitude of Unitarianism.

Now, all such teaching, whether the Bible is simply misinterpreted, or is deliberately abandoned as a standard, is entirely outside any true conception of Christian preaching, and is in the broadest sense unscriptural.

(2) Preaching is unscriptural when it substitutes other themes for those of the Bible. This has frequently been done, especially in times and places in which faith in the doctrines of Redemption had died out, or become seriously weakened. There must be something to preach about, and when the evangelical doctrine is forsaken, topics are chosen according to the taste and caprice of the preacher or his hearers of the

PREVALENT IDEAS OF THE DAY.

Scripture is not controverted, nor any of its leading doctrines assailed, but something beyond its pale and more agreeable to the natural mind engages the attention of the pulpit. Sometimes ethical disquisitions, without special reference to the Christian standard, or to the necessary relation between faith and practice, will be the fashion. Or the preference may be for natural science; and astronomy, geology, biology, etc., take the place of the Gospel. Many preachers devote themselves much to social and political questions, which always have an air of the practical, and have greater attraction for the masses than topics of a more abstract kind, or topics more remote from every-day life. Under pretence of directing public opinion, elevating society and the like, the preacher will quit his proper themes, and go into questions of politics, education, social progress, etc., which important interests would eventually profit more by preaching which

should keep more to its own province. Where religious sentiment is very weak, and the Word of God little esteemed, the preacher will often let the Bible alone; but if his hearers are not quite prepared for this, he will, by references to the Scriptures and the principles of the faith, give a colouring of religion to his discourse, and persuade himself and his audience that he has not forgotten his commission. But there have been many instances of preachers, if such they may be called, who discarded religious subjects, and avowedly dealt with those which were purely secular. It was notably so in parts of Germany in the end of the last century and the beginning of this—when a preacher was known to make agriculture his subject, and dilate on the advantages of subsoil ploughing. To refer to the topics of sensational preachers in our own country, which have met our own eyes, were an unpleasant task; but many of these topics have hardly closer connection with the ministry of reconciliation than the subject of husbandry has.

Religion must, of course, be in a low condition before such topics can be introduced into the pulpit. The natural reverence of many who are not living Christians would not tolerate the open substitution of secular interests for those which relate to the kingdom of God; but certain it is, that when it has been deemed impolitic or premature to attack Christianity, it has often been set aside in favour of subjects which preacher and hearers thought more interesting, or subjects which more readily

LEND THEMSELVES TO SENSATIONAL TREATMENT.

No one will understand me to imply that the Christian religion is not thoroughly practical, taking supervision of every department of human life, and containing principles which should be applied to everything in which we engage. Whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, all should be done to the glory of God. Whatever affects the well-being, whether of the individual or of society, is regulated by religion, and the true preacher will know how to apply the Christian law in all cases. We plead not for the exemption of any part of life from the scope and authority of the divine legislation; but no ingenious person will fail to note the difference between the faithful application of the Christian ethics to daily life and the treatment of common subjects which never lifts them above the secular level. All preaching of this latter kind is unscriptural. We do not desire a narrow conception of the preacher's office, but we would have him constantly remember that his topics are given to him in the Word of God, and that his whole province as a Christian teacher is marked out and defined by the authority from which he received his commission. Who is unto him if he preaches not the Gospel, but something else—if he seeks the interest of novelty to his preaching by leaving the King's highway and treading paths of his own. His Master will reckon with him for this.

(3) But in order to deserve the epithet "Scriptural," preaching must have more than the negative merit of shunning error, and of not directly substituting other themes for those of the Gospel. Scriptural preaching will inadequately proclaim the kingdom of God. It will set forth the entire body of truth made known to us in the Divine Word for the religious instruction of men and their spiritual guidance. No part of this truth should be kept back, and every part should be presented in its relations to the whole.

It is here assumed that there is a body or system of truth contained in the Scriptures, which may, on the whole, be definitely ascertained, so as to become the matter of preaching. This, indeed, is a position which few deny. Wide differences of opinion, of course, exist as to the precise conception of this or that truth, and as to the construction of the scheme of Biblical doctrine—with these we are not at present concerned—but it is hardly in dispute that we have in the Bible a circle of teaching, a scheme of doctrine, a connected series of truths concerning God and man, sin and redemption, duty and privilege, the life that now is and that which is to come. As the human body with all its members is one, so is there

UNITY IN THE SPIRITUAL BODY.

the Church of God; and the true conception of the various doctrines of the Bible corresponds to this unity. These doctrines are seen to be complementary of each other, and taken together they constitute the revelation of God in His holy Word. "There is one God the Father, of whom are all things, and we in Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him." And of spiritual gifts it is said, "All these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will." The Churches all acknowledge, and few individuals deny, that there is presented to us in Scripture a body of truth, which is the proper material both of a theological system and of pulpit instruction. We cannot here attempt any syllabus of these truths. They are found in greater or less detail in the creeds and confessions of the Church, in the many ages since creeds began to be constructed. The Apostles' Creed, so-called, is a very brief summary of them, and we have a much more extended and elaborate statement in a document also familiar to us all, the Westminster Confession of Faith. That there is one God, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, the Maker of heaven and earth, revealed to us in Trinity, as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, that man, created in the Divine image, has fallen into an estate of sin and misery, from which he cannot deliver himself, that in the love of God redemption was purposed, and the Son came in the flesh to atone for sin and save His people from it, that the Holy Spirit applies redemption, in regenerating and sanctifying those who believe; that all who believe in Christ maintain good works; that the professing people of God are organized into a Church, in which the Word is preached and the sacraments administered, and by which the kingdom of God is advanced in the world; that this present state of existence will be followed by an everlasting state, in which the destiny of men shall correspond to their relation to God and the Saviour while they are here; that the Lord Jesus Christ shall come again to raise the dead, to judge the world and to introduce the kingdom of glory; these and many other related truths are, in the judgment of the whole Church, clearly enunciated in the Scriptures.

Now, in any theological digest which may be set forth or taught, these and the connected doctrines or truths would all find their place. But in preaching also must

ALL THESE GREAT CENTRAL TRUTHS

or facts be declared, expounded and enforced. To present some of them and to pass by others would not be faithful nor wise. The preacher is bound to declare the whole counsel of God, and to keep back no part of it. By study, meditation and prayer he will seek to comprehend the truth of God, and being well assured of its divinity, he will endeavour to give it forth, in its entire contents and scope, so that the end of preaching may be completely gained.

To sit in judgment upon the profitableness of any part of the Bible or any element of its teaching he will regard as beyond his province; according to his ability and the grace given unto him he will strive to reflect in his ministry the substance of doctrine contained in the inspired records.

It is not meant that in all points the province of preaching—the field of truth in which it moves—should precisely coincide with that of systematic theology. Theology, aiming as it does at scientific completeness and order, will embrace subsidiary elements of various kinds, with which preaching may, and should, almost wholly dispense; but the preacher is not more at liberty than the theologian to take account of only a few of the great Scripture truths, and to pass by the rest as unsuitable for his purpose.

Is the preacher then (it may be asked) bound so to exhibit to reflect the totality of the Christian doctrine as to leave nothing to his own personality, his subjectivity, in giving the preference to those parts of truth, those views and aspects of it, which his own experience and attainments best qualify him to proclaim? I would not answer in the affirmative without

A WORD OF EXPLANATION.

Could we find a man who is qualified to render in its completeness the entire circle of truth which preaching should exhibit—so to do this that no truth should be neglected, and that all truths should have the relative prominence which our Scripture models of preaching would give them—he would be an ideally perfect preacher in this regard. But such perfection of mental and spiritual symmetry will hardly be found; and it is doubtless the will of God that the Christian preacher and teacher should avail of his own aptitudes—should draw upon his own personality—in giving to the truths which he has most completely realized the force and vividness which his own experience may qualify him to impart to them. Still, no preacher, certainly no pastor, should feel at liberty to present only some truths, avoiding or lightly touching others, on the ground that his religious attainments do not prepare him to handle them. Rather will the faithful minister of Christ seek a larger and more symmetrical Christian experience, so that he can more adequately proclaim the doctrines of the kingdom. A perfectly-rounded and healthful ministry would give to the many elements of divine truth the relative prominence which they have in the Word of God. If the due perspective of truth is not preserved it may almost be converted into error. If doctrines and matters which are little in the foreground in Scripture—which are clearly subordinate to Christian teaching—are made prominent and consequently dwelt upon, or if the opposite take place, the true standard and measure of doctrine is lost, and some degree of evil will necessarily follow. A partial and distorted development of Christian character, if nothing worse, will inevitably ensue. This point is of exceeding importance and might well bear expansion; but the remaining matters to which we wish to refer will not allow more words concerning it. Let the preacher ever observe the proportion of truth. While proclaiming with all his ability that which God has especially taught him, let him have no pet subjects, no hobbies. Otherwise he introduces a purely human element, and sacrifices to the flesh.

These remarks will not be understood to imply that the preacher should aim at setting forth the

ENTIRE SCHEME OF REDEMPTION

in every discourse. However commendable the motive which impels to it, any such practice would, in the case of a settled pastor, assuredly end in seriously impairing, if not destroying, his ministry. A bald and narrow reiteration of a few truths, even the cardinal truths, ill supplies the place of the careful and varied instruction which should neglect no province of divine truth and no class of hearers—which should provide milk for the babes and solid food for the mature—thus securing perpetual freshness in all the variety of topics with which Scripture itself is familiar. There is really no force in the objection so often made to this view, viz., that every sermon should contain so full a statement of the Gospel that any inquirer hearing it should have adequate direction regarding the way of life. Every sermon should, indeed, be a Gospel sermon, and should contemplate the conversion or the edification of the hearer; but both these ends will be best attained by a ministry which conforms to Scripture in its variety of topic and point of view. Nearly all the people ordinarily found in our Churches are acquainted with the letter of the Gospel; what is needed is that some vital truth should be impressed upon the mind by the Holy Spirit; and if this is done as to one truth, say the nature and evil of sin, or the love of God in the gift of His Son, or the necessity of regeneration, the related truths, which also require to be spiritually apprehended, will be borne in upon the soul with demonstration of the Spirit at the same time. Should the preacher, indeed, know that he is addressing persons ignorant even of the letter, whether in heathen or in Christian lands, he will surely take this into account, and give a more detailed statement of truth than would be requisite in different circumstances. A preacher who remains but a few weeks in any locality may expound the Gospel scheme in every discourse, but experience concurs with Scripture in showing that the preacher who would hold his position, with influence constantly growing, must cultivate another style of sermon. They were wont to say in Europe that every road led to Rome, and so we may affirm that every line of Scripture truth leads to Christ. Let there be no doubt that every sermon is an evangelical utterance, that it breathes the spirit of Christ and directly aims at exalting Him; if so, it need not embrace the theological curriculum. Yet let me add that when a preacher has some great opportunity, speaking, for example, on some important public occasion, he will wisely choose a subject which is not remote from the heart of the Gospel. Let him, according to his advantage, bear full and hearty testimony to Christ the Lord.

Still further: the obligation to set forth the whole truth does not forbid the preacher to accommodate his teaching in matter as in manner, to the

SPECIAL CONDITION OF HIS HEARERS.

Such accommodation is required not merely when an audience is to be addressed for a single time, but also in cases where the preacher will continue to exercise his ministry. He finds his hearers in a certain moral and intellectual condition—in a certain attitude toward the Gospel and the kingdom of God. Well, he must bring before them at first—perhaps keep prominent for a considerable period—certain truths and views which they especially need to learn. It would be useless, possibly hurtful, to pass on to other truths until these have made their impression and accom-