

## OUGHT PREACHING TO BE DOGMATIC?

(Continued).

(1) *The end sought to be accomplished by preaching, when viewed in the light of our mental constitution, shows that it should be dogmatic.* So far as man is concerned, that end is on all hands admitted to be his spiritual benefit—his religious improvement. This is the end in regard both to the regenerate and unregenerate—the good and the bad. In the case of the impenitent and unbelieving the primary object is to bring them to repentance and faith; in the case of the believer it is sought to promote growth in Christian character, in the knowledge and love of God, and in capacity and zeal for the service of God. Now the question comes to be: How can this end be accomplished? By what kind of instrumentality can Christian character be originated and developed? It is agreed that preaching, while not the exclusive, is a highly important instrumentality; therefore we inquire, of what sort must preaching be? Our reply is, that since all proper states of mind, all that is good in human character, arises from apprehension and acceptance of the truth concerning God and our relations to Him, preaching should be dogmatic, *i.e.*, it should faithfully present and apply this truth. Nothing can be a substitute for the truth manifested “to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” This is scriptural doctrine, but it is also correct philosophy, and will be denied only by those who misconceive the nature of true religion, or the way in which the human mind is to be approached and influenced. Nothing can be more ridiculous than to exhort a man and to appeal to him till he sees what you would have him do, and why you would have him do it. You are first didactic, then persuasive, and didactic in order to be persuasive. Seeking to persuade men to walk in the paths of true religion, the preacher will describe those paths, and will make plain his arguments for entering upon them, or prosecuting them with increased earnestness. The process to be accomplished is a rational process, and while no persuasion of the preacher can supersede the work of the Divine Spirit, he will proceed according to the laws by which the mind and heart are naturally governed. As before stated, he will not forget that his office is not identical with that of the theologian, and he will not imagine that his duty is over when he has clearly expounded the several truths and principles of religion to which his discourse relates. His constant aim will be to apply these truths and principles to the hearts and consciences of his hearers; but he will seek not less solicitously than the speaker or writer whose province is scientific, to satisfy the minds of those addressed regarding the principles of religion—the truths which underlie his exhortations. It is not required that the didactic or dogmatic should in every discourse precede the hortatory, or be intermingled in a certain proportion with it. The preacher will often take for granted the intellectual comprehension of the truths which he desires to press home, and he may properly deliver many discourses in which the element of direct teaching is not prominent, but it will never be matter of indifference to him what conceptions of religious truth are entertained by his hearers; and his ministry in the entire course of it will propound and exhibit fully, clearly, and earnestly the great doctrines of the Gospel—the principles of the kingdom of God. His ministry will involve a gross psychological mistake if he shuns the didactic and confines himself to exhortation. For even should the proper religious conceptions be in the minds of his hearers, it is necessary to vivify them by repeated and earnest statement of them, and for anything that he knows some of his hearers may not have those conceptions, or they may occupy a position of intellectual opposition or hesitancy. The address even of the mere exhorter ever must to some extent hold the didactic element in solution, but a preacher who is never anything else than a mere exhorter will poorly accomplish the aim of the Christian ministry, and will soon cease to interest and benefit those whose mental constitution his discourses fail to respect. Now, it is here to be carefully remembered that all right spiritual conditions and characteristics are produced by the truth, and may be called the counterpart of it. Everything in thought, feeling, and conduct, which is morally approvable, is formed under the influence of the appropriate truth applied by the Holy Ghost. The truth is the necessary seed from which the virtue, whether of heart or of conduct, shall spring. Thus we read of “the incorruptible seed of the Word which liveth and abideth for ever.” It follows if we seek to produce any proper spiritual state, to produce or strengthen any virtue, we must present and apply the truth which stands related to it. Whatever mental state the preacher would induce, whatever virtue he would form or strengthen, he must begin by manifestation of truth, the appropriate truth. He cannot gain his end—he cannot make any progress towards it—unless he be didactic as well as hortatory. He must declare the truths and doctrines of the Divine Word; and inasmuch as Christian character is wide, and the necessities of the Church and the world manifold, and all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness—his teaching will not confine itself to a few particulars, but will embrace, as well as may be, the entire cycle of revealed truth. The view now set forth is so clearly in accordance with a true psychology that the opposition to it so strenuously and often made seems hard to account for. The root of this hostility—the *proton pseudos*—consists frequently, we cannot doubt, in a wrong conception of what true religion—true piety—is. According to the opinion of many, religion is merely sentiment. It has its seat entirely in the emotions. It is trust in that great Being who is ever present with us, and who is the source of life and happiness; but, in order to such trust, it is not necessary we should be able to frame propositions and make affirmations regarding this Being. In some instances a more or less developed pantheism will not permit the employment of terms of decided personality. He is the “power external to us which makes for righteousness.” But even where the soul has not come so completely under this moral paralysis, we find in multitudes of instances a shrinking from all very definite statement regarding God, the person and work of Christ, and the unseen world. Were this simply

a recoil from a too materialistic and detailed handling of those things which we see but “through a glass darkly,” and from a too anthropopathic treatment of the divine attributes, we might regard it with toleration, and even with some degree of sympathy. But it means much more than this. It is dimness of the spiritual sight; it is weakness of the conscience; it is unwillingness to know God, and be brought near to Him. If subjective religion is nothing more than a vague sentiment of reverence or trust, we properly shrink from every species of dogmatism regarding the divine nature and perfections, and the way of salvation. There can, in this case, be no need of discussing questions touching the Trinity, the incarnation, the person of Christ, the nature and efficacy of His death, etc., for whatever importance these points may have in relation to theology (if indeed theology be a complete science at all), they have no connection with religion, according to this view of it. But if, as another extreme view would have it, religion consists exclusively in conduct, however inadequate this conception of it may be, it scarcely affects the question as to dogmatic preaching. For if the preacher is not with ceaseless monotony to cry “Do right, do right,” he must explain the nature of the several virtues, treat of the consequences of virtuous conduct and the opposite, and shew that all virtue depends upon the nature and character of God, and derives its chief sanction from His authority.

(2) *I proceed next to consider the scriptural evidence of the position that preaching should be dogmatic.* (a) To some extent the scriptural argument is anticipated in the account already given of the nature of true religion. We have, in our previous reasoning, attempted to shew that personal religion is the reflex of divine truth vitally apprehended, that every feature in the renewed character corresponds to some feature in the truth of God, and that all legitimate Christian experience is developed, and all right conduct directed and governed, by the inspired Word. It was not possible to exhibit the argument under the preceding head without touching upon this ground. But it is here proper to say that the scriptural proof of it is abundant and clear. You cannot open the practical and devotional parts of the Old Testament or the New without seeing that all genuine experimental religion, and all holy actions, are the counterpart of the truth, and that the reception of the truth surely leads to them.

(b) But the New Testament contains explicit instructions for the preacher concerning the scope and character of his teaching. A bishop must be “apt to teach” (*didaktikos*), must be “nourished up in the words of faith and good doctrine,” and must “hold fast the form of sound words.” He must “command and teach.” He must “give attendance to reading, to exhortation, and to doctrine.” “If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud and knoweth nothing.” That provision may be made for the continuance of the ministry, Timothy is instructed to “commit the things which he has seen and heard in faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” The true teacher, who needs not to be ashamed, will “rightly divide the word of life.” The words of false teachers, even such as “err from the faith,” “eat like a canker,” and “overthrow the faith of some.” The apostle charges the evangelist to “preach the Word, for the time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine . . . but shall heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears, and they shall turn away their ears from the truth.” In his letter to Titus, the apostle, describing the bishop, says he must “hold fast the faithful Word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers.” And again, “speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.” And having referred to the holy life of the believer, to his constant looking for the appearing of the divine Saviour, and to the sacrifice offered by that Saviour for our redemption, he adds, “These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority.” And again, declaring the great truths of redemption originating in God’s love, of our justification of Christ’s righteousness—not our own—of regeneration and continual renewal by the Spirit, he thus speaks, “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works.” We are impressed—awed—with the importance attached to holding fast, teaching in purity and contending earnestly for the truth. The preacher who nervously shuns dogma cannot preach as Paul, Peter, and John would have him do—cannot take the pastoral epistles as his directory. But the wise and faithful preacher, seeking to comprehend to the full extent of inspired teaching the great things of the kingdom of God will earnestly proclaim all that he has himself been taught. Thus sinners shall be converted, and believers built up in their most holy faith.

In the New Testament we have several specimens of apostolical preaching, and we have many letters written to Churches or to individual believers. An analysis of these discourses and epistles would be very instructive, as shewing how the apostles actually fulfilled their own office of preaching and teaching. This branch of proof cannot, however, be here exhibited except in the briefest manner. No analysis of the epistles can, of course, be here attempted. I can only state, what we all know, that they are largely didactic—some of them, as the epistles to the Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, being more so than the rest. But in all these letters there is a didactic element, and in nearly all passages which may be called purely didactic. Definite views on such great matters as the proper deity of our Lord, His priestly office, including atonement and intercession, the universal guilt and misery of men, the righteousness of God by faith, regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Ghost, the relation of the law to the Gospel, are not merely implied in a current of exhortation, but are clearly stated, and nearly all of them established and defended at length. Everyone knows the character of the three epistles which I have named, and it seems strange indeed that any thoughtful reader of these epistles, if he does but regard apostolical teaching as a model for us, should question the propriety and necessity of full and detailed exposition of Christian doctrine in the pulpit. These careful demonstrations of doctrine shew the import-

ance which the apostles attached to it, and the large place it should ever hold in preaching; and they shew that when the first principles of the faith are understood and received—“repentance from dead works, faith toward God, the doctrine of baptisms, and laying on of hands, and resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment”—the office of the teacher is not discharged, for he must lead his hearers on to “perfection”—to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the Redeemer’s work in all its aspects. With these examples before us, we cannot hesitate whether we shall follow the counsels of those who warn us against what is popularly called dogmatism, and who, if the presence of doctrine (except the directly ethical) is allowed in sermons at all, would refrain from emphasizing the modicum which they tolerate. Rather with Paul, let the preacher reverently seek to guide his hearers into the depths of those mysteries which reveal the glory of God in redemption; and let him earnestly pray for a deeper knowledge and experience, that he may the better be fitted for such a task. Let him never dream that exhortation on a meagre basis of doctrine, uncertainly and timidly avowed, is all that his office requires of him. Such an ideal of preaching he cannot get from Scripture.

(3) *The history of preaching shews that the dogmatic is the really effective method.* We here request that the true conception of dogmatic preaching be kept in mind, and that we do not, in spite of protest, identify it with preaching addressed too exclusively with the intellect, or with a style which is cold, or hard, or technical, or minute in analysis, or metaphorical, or arrogant. It is the preaching which makes doctrine the root of practice, and regards all genuine religious sentiment as the product of truth, which seeks above everything to make truth real and impressive. Now we state with confidence that preaching of this type has better accomplished the end of the pulpit than any other description of preaching has—than the practical, so called, or the vague and sentimental. There may, of course, be dogmatic preaching which enforces error instead of truth; but we shall not be understood to claim good results for the method irrespective of the doctrine. It is the truth of God which must be preached, and no substitute for it can be found. But our contention is that the preaching which has proved truly effective, which has eminently resulted in the production of spiritual life and a holy walk, has been the dogmatic. The preachers who have spoken to their fellow-men with power have been those in whom the truths of revelation were living convictions, and who have appeared as men delivering their testimony, and persuading their hearers to receive a message from heaven. After what has been said regarding the sermons and addresses of the apostles, I might well claim, in proof of my position, the remarkable success with which they preached the Gospel. Thousands received the Word from the lips of these witnesses—these men who must speak the things which they had seen and heard—these eminently dogmatic preachers. But inasmuch as it seems better to cite instances in which inspiration and the other peculiarities of apostolical preaching are not involved, I proceed to say that the *patristic preaching* which most remarkably developed spiritual life was dogmatic. A pre-eminent illustration of a dogmatic ministry was that of Augustine; for the teachings of this great servant of Christ ever enforce truths which he was honoured so triumphantly to vindicate against error. And I need scarcely say that the religious life of the Church—its piety—was more indebted to Augustine and his school than to any school or class of teachers of less dogmatic tendency. The leaders of the Reformation, it will hardly be disputed were dogmatists, and we need not fear to say that there would have been no Reformation under their hand had they not been so. No one doubts that Calvin is dogmatic throughout; *dogmatic*, indeed, is one of the epithets which his adversaries love to fling at him. But Luther is hardly less dogmatic. What would Luther, do you think, have said of the preacher whose harangue should have been after this fashion: “Be true to yourself, carefully follow your religious instincts and intentions; lead the useful, the gentle, the beautiful life?” Could this prophet of fire, this son of thunder, have endured such folly? Had he not a message from God which his soul longed to deliver? It is quite true that some of the theology to which the Reformation subsequently gave birth was too minute in analysis, and perhaps over-confident in positions of a secondary kind—positions which cannot be regarded as essential to the integrity of the truth, and that this feature of the theology did, to some extent, affect unfavourably the preaching of the times in which it prevailed. In some instances, too, the didactic element was prominent beyond due proportion; and sermons could be pointed to which are hard, technical, and almost repulsive. We have no interest in concealing the defects and wrong features by which dogmatic preaching has sometimes been marred. But will any fair-minded man who believes the doctrine of the Reformation deny that the dogmatic preaching of these three centuries, so far as it faithfully enforces the truth which the Reformation vindicated, has been productive of the best fruit—has had special evidence of the divine approbation? Wherever you look, on the continent of Europe, in Britain, in America, in the mission fields of the world, the earnest and faithful preaching of the doctrines embodied in our standards has been accompanied with the power of the Holy Ghost; men have been turned unto the Lord, and a religious life of unmistakable identity with that of New Testament times has been developed. Wherever, on the other hand, the great leading doctrines of the Gospel (for we count these one with Reformation doctrines) have ceased to appear in preaching, or have been timidly and apologetically introduced, and the preacher has occupied himself rather in delineating and enforcing virtue, whether in sentiment and thought or in outward conduct, spiritual death has prevailed, and the kingdom of God has withdrawn itself from view. Poorly have the lessons of the last century and a half been learned by the Presbyterian who does not know this fact. Amongst preachers distinguished from one another by every variety of natural endowment and of culture you cannot name one whose spoken or published discourses have been markedly fruitful who was not, in the good sense, dogmatic—who did not, “by manifestation of the truth,” seek to “commend himself to every man’s consci-