

dogmatic, or other point that involves the necessity of a considerable amount of patient reading and patient thinking—labour, in fact—before it can be made plain, clear, and profitable, as well as popular, the text is turned away for a simpler, or at all events an easier topic. I at once “sat at the feet” of a man who had always three heads to his sermon, and who always wound up with three practical inferences, and almost invariably concluded each with a stanza out of Watts’s Hymns; but whatever was his text, and however it was divided, he had always the same sermon, substantially; for he had always his own very small sum of theology. And that is the tendency of all textual preachers. They take a text, one of the texts commonly attached to sermons, and take occasion therefrom to repeat their worn-out platitudes once more. I remember that the preacher last referred to was wont to have his discourse divided not only into three heads, but they were nearly always of exactly the same length. After he had expatiated a while, the due while, on the first topic, he coughed, and, “this brings me to consider in the second place”—though how it “brought” him, or by what mental link he connected firstly and secondly together, it was vastly difficult to see.

There is a worse system than even the textual one growing by much too common. Men are now tired of even whole texts. A complete verse or even sentence seems too much of the word of God to be taken at one time. A great many of our modern popular preachers content themselves with a few words, often with two; and I know a neighbour of my own who has got down to one word, nearly as a rule—a good honest sentence being with him the exception. The last feat of this kind I heard of was an essay on the word “alone.”

I heard a very popular English divine once preach in Paris. His text was “The world which now is, and that which is to come.” His introduction was a sort of chuckle over his own ability in selecting his “text,” for he thought it very suitable to the time and the place. It was a pity that he did not take the whole passage, and show us that godliness had the promise of both worlds. Another textual system is to be deprecated—I mean that of making the text simply a peg to hang the sermon on. The system puts the word of man above the word of God; and it is only them that honour God and his word whom God honours. Another feature of this system is also to be deprecated—that of “adapting” the language of the Bible to our own meaning. I have read a great many sermons preached from texts which give evidence that the preacher never seriously set himself to find out what the real meaning of his text was. He sees certain words which may be made to convey a certain sense, which suits some purpose he has in hand; and he lays hold of them and marches fearlessly on. Strange to say, so conscientious a man as John Foster is on more than one occasion guilty of such a grievous fault. He has a singularly able discourse on the text, “The powers of the world to come;” but he takes the phrase, “the world to come” there, to mean the future state, the unseen world, which is not the apostle’s meaning at all in that place. As a rule, Foster expounds his text at least, and does so truly and thoroughly; and some of his noblest discourses partake of the nature of exposition. One text he so expounds as to imprint it in all its vivid meaning on the memory of the reader for ever, “Where will ye leave your glory?”

We need hardly stay to condemn “sensation texts.” A Chelsea divine, not of the Presbyterian Church, is currently believed to have taken the words “the asses” as his text. We have no words strong enough to express our condemnation of such unworthy ways. I think the textual system, when it stands alone, must be, in even the ablest hands, necessarily imperfect. It must avoid so many textual and other difficulties; it must overlook so many Bible beauties; it must confine the topics discussed to so limited a range; it must pass over so many of the minute observances and precepts; and, finally, it must so impoverish the preacher’s own mind and heart, that it seems to us that even