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OF PARTICULAR

AND

EXPERIMENTAL PREACHING.

BY THE REV. JOHN JENNINGS.



RIGHTLY to divide the word of truth is the necessary care of a minister, if he would be "approved of God, and be a workman that needeth not to be ashamed." And it is a skill worth studying for, and laboring to attain: our success and the good of souls depend upon it more than is commonly imagined.

No doubt you may have heard many honest people express their dissatisfaction with some preachers in such terms as these: "They go on constantly in a *general way*, that does not come close to the heart, reaches not my case and experience, and I am not edified by them." Their complaint is not altogether without meaning or reason, as I hope you will be convinced by and by.

1. To keep a little in view that passage of Scripture I have mentioned, *dividing the word* may mean these four things: 1. Going through the variety of Gospel subjects; declaring the whole counsel of God, the doctrines of grace, threatenings, promises, and the duties of morality; and giving each its due proportion.

Some, finding their thoughts flow most readily and affectionately on the doctrines of grace, and that by these they best command the affections of the hearers, are altogether upon them, and neglect to teach the people to observe what Christ

has commanded them. I bear many of them witness they have a zeal for God, but I wish it were more according to knowledge. They do not sufficiently consider that holiness is the very design of Christianity; and our preaching on other heads is in order the better to enforce duty, and render men like to Christ.

I am afraid, from what I have observed, that this strain of preaching will increase the number of those hearers whom our Saviour describes by the "stony ground," in the parable of the sower; namely, such who, though full of notions and transient affections, and forward in professing, yet have an unsubdued will, have no root in themselves, and bring forth no fruit to God. This strain, I fear, though it may seem to bring many toward Christ, will bring but few safely to him. Many of their hearers, with Christ much in their mouths, will prove but hypocrites settled on their lees, and slaves to lusts. Nor is this strain more happy for the uniform growth of the sincere Christian. They that sit under it are too frequently low, imperfect, and partial in practical goodness; distempered with conceit and preposterous zeal for words and phrases, and things of little or no consequence; perplexed and perplexing others with a thousand groundless scruples; children in understanding, and it were happy were they so in malice too; but alas! their narrowness of mind infects the heart with uncharitable affections.

Others, having not arrived at the relish of the doctrines of grace themselves, suppress them in their preaching, and are altogether on morality; enforcing it with no motives of the Gospel, except some of those addressed to fear. These, if they are masters of much fire, may be convincing to some; but it fares with most of their converts as with the man in the parable, out of whom the unclean spirit went for a while, who, finding his house empty, returned with seven more; and the latter end of such is worse than the beginning. Or else, the awakened hearer either takes up a proud dependence upon a mistaken, external, and pharisaical righteousness; or, not being by his teacher led to Christ, he proceeds not, settles not; but abiding long under the doubtful concern, is wearied with it, weary of it, and comes to nothing; which seems to be the thought in Hosea: "Ephraim is an unwise son; he should not stay long in the place of the breaking forth of children." Or lastly, if any are truly converted under such ministry, it is very usual that they are forced to desert it, to find richer and sweeter pasture for their souls.

Some of their hearers may possibly prefer this strain of preaching; but it does not thence follow that they are the better for it. To illustrate this remark, I will recite a paragraph out of *Remarkable Passages in the Life of a Private Gentleman*: "Spiritual searching discourses I did not so much savor as mere moral doctrines, though too immoral myself. The hopes I had conceived of the strength of my good resolutions rendered them grateful. *Seneca's Morals* I read with pleasure; *Mr. Baxter's Saint's Rest* frightened me; so after reading a few passages, I threw it by." Thus with regret he tells us what little profit he had in that way, of his fondness for which he was ashamed, when he came to be of Paul's mind, to count all dross and dung, that he might win Christ.

2. The putting of a thought in several distinct views and lights, for different purposes and designs. The sacred writers are herein our pattern, and that not by chance, but for wise reasons. One view is designed to raise one affection; another view, to excite another of a different sort, and, finally, one of the views is designed as an antidote against the poison which the corruption of men's hearts might draw out of the other.

For instance, the terms and way of our justification and salvation are frequently stated thus: "That we must be found in Christ, having on the righteousness which is of God by faith," and "we must be made the righteousness of God in Him." And this view is exquisitely adapted to humble us, to draw forth love and gratitude, and encourage our hopes and dependence.

But lest this phraseology, if used alone, should beget security, at other times we are told, that "by works a man is justified, and not by faith only; and that faith without works is dead;" and that the inquiry at the last day shall be, Who has "fed the hungry, clothed the naked?" &c.

And most commonly these two views are united in the same paragraph; that one may prevent the ill consequences man's perverseness would draw from the other. As physicians, finding some dangerous effect likely to follow from a drug of sovereign virtue, mix some other with it to prevent the fatal consequences.

So we are said to be "elect, according to the fore-knowledge of God, through sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience, and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus." Again, we are told, that "by grace we are saved through faith, the gift of God, not

of works ; for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.”

I may give another instance, in the different ways the Scripture speaks of power and duty. Sometimes we are told that “we can not come to Christ expect the Father draw us.” That “without Christ we can do nothing.” That “if we live, it is not we, but Christ that liveth in us.” Now these views tend to hide pride from man, to create a diffidence of ourselves, and to centre our hopes and dependence on Christ ; but lest the slothful and wicked servant should make his impotence his excuse, we are called upon to “turn and make us new hearts,” exhorted to “ask and we shall receive,” and are assured “God will give the Spirit to them that ask him ;” and how happily are these two views united in this passage ! “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ; for it is God that worketh in you to will and to do.”

Now, less skilful dividers of the Word deal entirely in one of these views, and neglect the other ; and while they are laboring to excite one good affection, they raise another of a bad tendency together with it. To this in part it is owing that there are so many low or distempered Christians. Nor is this partiality more happy in effecting the real conversion of sinners, who generally, under such management, are either left asleep, and settled in a fond conceit of their own righteousness, or else stumble at the rock of offense (in a different manner indeed from what the Jews did) thinking to find by Christ a way to Heaven, without holiness or moral honesty.

3. Distinctly explaining and enforcing particular duties, and opposing particular sins. It is true, the whole scheme of the Gospel duty is deducible from the general heads of faith and love ; but, alas ! most men’s minds are slow, confused, and erroneous in long deductions ; and it is our business to lead them on in every step, and to show what particular duties to God, our neighbor, and ourselves, will flow from these principles, and are necessary to make the man of God perfect. We must particularly teach them to “add to their faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity,” if we would not leave them blind and untruthful ; and we should, in a particular manner, speak of “the fruits of the Spirit, as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance ;” and at proper seasons explain and enforce each of them. We should apply the lamp of

the Word to detect and disgrace all the particular "works of darkness," and to make manifest "the fruits of the flesh; such as adultery, lasciviousness, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like."

If I should read to a sick person a learned lecture on the benefit of health, and exhort him to take care to recover it, but never inquire into the nature of his disease, or prescribe proper methods and medicines for the cure, he would hardly acquiesce in me for his physician, or resign to me the care of his bodily health. Nor is it a more likely way to the soul's health to rest in mere general exhortations to holiness, without distinctly handling the several branches thereof, and the opposite sins.

4. Particularly applying to the several cases, tempers, and experiences of the hearers. Besides many thoughts suited in general to all cases, there might properly arise, in the application of most subjects, thoughts distinctly proper to the converted and unconverted; to notional hypocrites and mere moralists, to mourners, to backsliders, and lazy Christians; and at several times to a much greater variety of characters and persons. Now such particular addresses, when the case is drawn in a lively manner, and in the natural language of the sort of men intended, and judiciously and artfully treated, are the closest, most weighty, and most useful parts of the application.

That this is the true way of addressing an auditory, namely, to divide them into several classes, and distinctly speak to each, will be plain, if we look through the apostolic writings, and, I might add, the prophetic also, with this view; and we shall find that both prophets and apostles frequently take care to distinguish the holy and the vile, the converted and the unconverted. As for instance, as to their knowledge and apprehension of things: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit, they are foolishness to him, he can not know them: but the spiritual judge all things." And also as to their obedience to the law, "The carnal mind is enmity against God, is not subject to God's law, nor can be subject, or please God."

They particularly reprove scoffers, and confute gain-sayers: "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish." For instance, those who denied or cavilled at the resurrection: "Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die," etc.

And also those that were for a faith without works; "Wilt thou know, vain man, that faith without works is dead?" etc.

They address carnal stupid sinners in an awful way; denounce "woe to them that are at ease;" as Paul when he made Felix tremble, or as Stephen, "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised," etc.

They lead convinced sinners to Christ; to those that are inquiring they say: "If ye will inquire, inquire ye, return, come; turn to the strong hold; if the Lord hath torn he will heal." "Repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, for the remission of sins," etc. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," etc.

They reason with the moralist, and those that "trust in themselves that they are righteous;" showing their righteousness is "as filthy rags." "The law saith, there is none righteous, but all the world are guilty before God; therefore by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified; but the righteousness of God is manifested, that God might freely justify them that believe on Jesus, therefore man is justified by faith; boasting is excluded by the law of faith; and ye received the Spirit by the hearing of faith; the Gospel was before preached to Abraham; they that are of the works of the law are under the curse. But the law could not disannul the covenant confirmed before, but was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith; they then that are Christ's are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

They sharply rebuke and expose pretending hypocrites, showing them their abominations, detecting and confounding the wretches that "delight to know God's way, and hear his word, but will not do it." As Peter: "Thou hast no part in this matter; thy heart is not right in the sight of God;" and James: "Show me thy faith without thy works; the devils believe and tremble."

They rouse and encourage Christians who have but little strength, and persuade them to make further advances in religion—that he that is "feeble may be as David." "Ye are dull of hearing, for the time ye ought to have been teachers; strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age; therefore leaving the first principles, let us go on to perfection."

They deal with the several sorts of distempered Christians tenderly, and yet plainly and faithfully: as particularly, with those who idolize one minister, and despise others; telling them

it is not by might and power of man, but by God's Spirit, that the Gospel is successful. "While one saith, I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos, are ye not carnal? Who is Paul or Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed? It is God that giveth the increase; Paul, Apollos, Cephas, all are yours." They endeavor to soften those of too rigid a temper, exhorting them not to speak to the grief of those whom God hath smitten: as "Ye ought rather to forgive and comfort him; I beseech you confirm your love towards him." "If a man be over-taken in a fault, restore him in the spirit of meekness, considering lest thou also be tempted." They talk roundly to those who are apt to make God the author of sin; who say: "We unavoidably pine away in our iniquities, and how can we then be saved?" As in James, "Let no man say I am tempted of God; for God tempteth not any man."

Declining Christians are quickened, awakened, and put in mind of the love of their espousals; "Be watchful, and strengthened the things which remain, that are ready to die."

They awfully warn those who are in danger of sinning and falling back to perdition; telling them, "the righteousness they have done will be remembered no more;" and "God's soul will have no pleasure in them." "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, etc., if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, seeing they crucify the Son of God afresh."

They encourage the persecuted and afflicted; telling them: "When they pass through the fire and water, God will be with them," and that "when they are tried they shall come forth as gold, and be the Lord's in that day when he maketh up his jewels." "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed." "We are compassed with a cloud of witnesses; Jesus endured the cross, and is set down at the right hand of the Majesty on high; whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and that for our profit; chastening yields the peaceable fruits of righteousness." And more particularly, those that lament relations dead in Christ, are told they shall go to be happy with them, though the dead shall not return: "Sorrow not as do others that have no hope; for those that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

There are also particular lessons for strong Christians, namely, to be tender to the weak, and to be public-spirited, that as

“Ephraim should not envy Judah, so neither should Judah vex Ephraim.” “Him that is weak in the faith receive; let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; let none put a stumbling-block in his brother’s way; let not your good be ill spoken of; hast thou faith? have it to thyself; bear the infirmities of the weak; let every one please his neighbor for his good to edification. Knowledge puffeth up; but charity edifieth; let not your liberty be a stumbling-block to the weak—nor through thy knowledge let thy weak brother perish, for whom Christ died; if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world stands.” Again, they are told that “a mark is set upon the men” that deplore the sins of the times; and “a book of remembrance is written” for those who distinguish themselves by their piety in times of abounding wickedness. “Thou hast a few names who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.”

You find also a suitable portion for those who are groaning under corruption; who complain they were “shapen in iniquity,” and their actual “errors are past understanding;” although “I am carnal, sold under sin, and what I would I do not, and what I hate that do I; in my flesh dwells no good, and to perform good I find not, yea, with the flesh I serve the law of sin, (Oh! wretched man that I am!) yet, “I consent to God’s law, and delight in it after the inner man; it is not then I that do this evil, but sin that dwelleth in me. I thank God through Jesus Christ: with my mind I serve God’s law, and God will deliver me from the body of this death.” And they are told how God hath “laid on Christ our iniquities;” and he will be “the Lord our righteousness and strength.” “If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

The humble and penitent, who are of a contrite spirit, and tremble at God’s word, are comforted: “Ye were sorry indeed, it was but for a season; it was after a godly manner; I rejoice in it; such sorrow worketh repentance not to be repented of; it wrought in you carefulness, fear, desire, zeal, and revenge; you have approved yourselves clear in this matter.”

They who want direction, and cry out: “Oh! that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!” are sent to God for counsel. “If any man lack wisdom, let him ask it of God, and it shall be given him.”

The deceiver and the deceived (namely, those of evil minds,

who seduce others, and those that are misled in the simplicity of their hearts) are to be distinctly and differently treated; "On some have compassion, and others save with fear."

As for those of the house of Israel in desertion, who mourn after the Lord, who walk in darkness and see no light, and say, "the Lord hath forsaken me," there were, I believe, few, if any, in those days of the plentiful effusion of the Spirit, when the Gospel Church was in its infancy, and "a nation was to be born in a day;" but few, I say, who had doubts about their sincerity; they had persecutions, distress, and exercises of another sort; and those were sufficient. I am apt to think such cases were also rare in the beginning of the reformation from Popery; which seems to be the occasion of some of the first reformers confounding faith with assurance. However, there are laid up in the New-Testament, some proper hints of counsel for such as should in after times labor under the hidings of God's face; as "To examine themselves; for this to beseech the Lord; to clear themselves of sin; not to faint in well-doing;" and the like.

Brethren, from your acquaintance with the Scriptures, you will easily perceive that I could run this specimen much farther through the sacred writings; and if you peruse the writings of the most powerful and successful preachers, particularly the Puritan Divines, you will see that they herein imitated the great leaders of the Christian profession; and were large in their particular application to several sorts of persons; suiting their discourses to all the variety of the hearts of men, and sorts and frames of Christians, according to the precepts of Christianity, and, I may add, of true oratory. In this way they found their own hearts warmed, and thus they reached the hearts of their hearers; whilst many were imagining the minister had been told of their case, and made the sermon for them; and so was verified that passage: "The word of God is quick and powerful, a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Now, what success can we reasonably expect, if we do not take into close consideration the cases of our several spiritual patients? If a man, professing physic, should administer or prescribe one constant medicine for fevers, and another for consumptions, and so for other distempers, without considering the age, constitution, strength, and way of living of his patient, and not vary his method and medicines as those vary, we

should hardly call this the regular practice of physic. Nor can I think this general and undistinguishing way will be more safe, or likely to answer its end, in divinity than in medicine.

Now I rest persuaded, brethren, the thing is so evident, you can not but allow it is best to suit ourselves to all the variety of tempers and experience of the hearers, if it can be done; and I hope some thoughts may be successfully offered upon the way how this skill may be attained.

1. Above all, then, carefully study your own hearts, and preach over the ruder sketches of your sermons to yourselves first; by which means the correspondent workings of your own hearts and affections may furnish you with proper thoughts wherewith to apply closely to all whose temper, experience, and case are like your own: for what is supplied to your imperfect notes, out of the applicatory meditations of your own minds on the subject, will very probably, according to the usual way of the Spirit, happily and powerfully reach those of the same make in like circumstances.

2. But, alas! one man's experience falls far short of all the variety of men's hearts, and of the Spirit's work; nay, those whose heads are turned for close and regular thought, and whose time has been spent in study and letters, as they go on more rationally and evenly in religion, have less variety of experience than many of a different mould and way of thinking. Here it will be needful then to look out of ourselves, and take a large view, in order to be acquainted with cases and tempers different from our own; and with such methods of the Spirit's work as we ourselves have never experienced, but many others have. Now the best and original way of getting this acquaintance with men, and with God's workings in them (and I may add, of Satan's workings also) is by conversing freely with the serious people of our flock.

I know your thoughts will prevent me with an objection; you will say: This is almost impracticable, especially amongst persons of politeness and figure; these, alas! too rarely will use any such freedom with us, in laying open their hearts, and communicating their experience to us, as may give us the needful information. If we ever do arrive at any acquaintance with the experience of Christians, little thanks are due to such as these; they expect we should preach suitably to them, and that with as much reason as Nebuchadnezzar demanded of the wise men to interpret a dream they knew not. The middle and

lower sort of people, indeed, are more unreserved to grave ministers of age and standing, but will hardly use the same freedom with young men.

To help you over this difficulty, I would observe, that as for the polite, and men of some thought and reading, your own experience, with the allowances and corrections a moderate skill in human nature will enable you to make, may lead you into happy conjectures at their way of thinking. Besides, in the time of their visitation, under some sore affliction, you will find them more communicative; and an hour's free discourse with such as can give a rational and intelligible account of themselves, in a season when they are disposed to do it, is as valuable and useful as it is rare and difficult to enter into.

3. Again, have an eye upon the serious youth, whom nature and Providence has designed to place in a superior class; and especially at a time when the impressions of religion are new to them. You will find them more open than elder persons, if you court their intimacy, and relieve their bashfulness; and if you can see into the heart of a youth, then, with the proper allowances for alterations that age and business will make, you may pretty well guess at their turn of mind in more advanced years.

4. With the generality of serious and more advanced Christians, there needs not so much nicety to get into such a spiritual intimacy with them as we desire; the laying aside of nicety and ceremony, and getting into such a grave good-natured way as our character requires, is more than half-way to our purpose. Where this is insufficient to encourage the people to freedom, lead them into it by communicating first, either what yourselves have experienced, under the name of a third person (if modesty or prudence require it) or else what you have learned from others, without betraying the confidence they have put in you. By these methods we shall seldom fail of drawing serious people on to such a freedom as will be of use to them and ourselves. If we heartily go about it, we are pretty sure to succeed.

5. I may farther hint at a compendious way for gaining much knowledge of men's hearts in little time, namely. If you have any tolerable skill in the different tempers and complexions of mankind, distribute, in your thoughts, your people into classes, according to their natural genius and temper, and select one of each class, with whom to be more particularly acquainted; for

amongst those whom nature has formed alike, you will find upon further inquiry, a striking uniformity in the Spirit's work and way of proceeding with them.

6. I might recommend a way of knowing these things at second hand, namely, from the most popular and experimental authors; but this way is far inferior to the other: we shall but faintly paint any phenomenon of the heart, by copying another picture; it is infinitely preferable to do it from the life. Yet would I earnestly recommend the perusal of such authors as deal much in an experimental strain, and have been very successful in it; but with a different design, namely. That we may learn from them, how to describe, in a discreet and lively manner, such cases as we ourselves have observed; and how to address properly to those cases, with the like thoughts and expressions, as have in the course of their preaching happily answered the end.

After all, rightly to divide the word of truth, with true wisdom, is a matter of no small difficulty; but if we carefully and diligently go about it, with a zeal for our Master's interest, and sensible of our own insufficiency, asking wisdom of God, we know he giveth liberally, and will surely make us wise to win souls, to the honor of his name, and our own rejoicing in the day of the Lord Jesus. To whom, with the Father and Holy Spirit, that one God whom we adore, be paid the highest honors and praises to eternal ages. Amen.



