

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

APT TO TEACH

E. G. ASHBY, M.A., B.D.

There seems to be a growing realisation in many quarters of the need of sound teaching in things of God. This is both an encouragement that such a desire should be expressed and a recognition of failure that such has not always been provided in past years.

Now it is required of an elder that he should be apt to teach, and the same qualification is required of the servant of the Lord (1 Tim. 3; 2 Tim. 2), so it is clear that the apostle realised the importance of this. In our day, on the one hand Christians are crying out for *teaching*, while in other parts there is the complaint that the younger generation will not come even when arrangements are made to meet their need. It is true that a time will come when men 'will not endure sound doctrine' (2 Tim. 4:3, 4), but our duty is to 'preach the Word, being instant in season and out of season; reproving and exhorting with all long-suffering and doctrine' (2 Tim. 4:2, 3); the Scripture is given 'that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works' (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

It is imperative that we should be realistic in facing up to the circumstances of our time. Times have changed. No longer would one be likely to hear the statement: 'Mr—must be very learned; we couldn't understand a word of what he was saying'! How true is the proverb, '*Ars est celare artem*' ('true art consists in concealing art'). The book which is so easy to read, where the thoughts seem to flow so very natural, is that to which most careful preparation has been given. The more thorough our preparation, the more effective will be our teaching. It is well to remember that so many of our present younger generation have for one reason or another had to attend courses of lectures in their secular studies that they are likely to be somewhat critical in their approach: they will be quick to recognise and value clear, forthright exposition, but somewhat impatient of the reverse.

It is common knowledge that if one wishes to teach there are two essentials: it is necessary to understand the *subject matter* to be taught and *also* the pupil. The same holds good in spiritual

things. If we are to teach effectively we must grasp the truths to be taught and understand those to whom we minister. In spiritual matters it is not enough to grasp the truth intellectually, though that is essential, but the truth must grasp us. There must be experimental knowledge as well as intellectual understanding. All marvelled at the Lord Jesus, for He taught as One having authority (Mk. 1:22). Of course He did, for He spoke of the Father with Whom He was One, and of the home which He had just left. We cannot be like that, but in any little measure in which we have personal experience it will help. So we must seek to grasp our message in both senses, seek to clothe it in words adequate to convey the truth, and also understand our hearers.

Perhaps these points could be emphasized under the following headings:

Conviction

First and foremost our teaching must be the Truth. It must bear the stamp of authority. It must be such that it is not 'vain' (cf. 1 Thess. 2:1), but that we can proclaim it boldly in God's name (1 Thess. 2:2). In such circumstances it will come to our hearers—not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance; the more so if our manner of life commends it, as was the case with the apostle Paul (1 Thess. 1:5). If it is to ring true with conviction it must accord with the Word of God: 'To the law and the testimony; if they speak not according to *this* word, it is because there is no light in them' (Isa. 8:20). There were those in Paul's day whose greater nobility was noted, for they 'searched the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so': they were thoughtful and critical listeners for whom the final court of appeal was not tradition but the Word of God. But the truth of our message is not the only essential, though of the highest importance.

We also need

Clarity

There is great need in these days for clearness of thought. If the success of teaching is to be gauged not by what the teacher knows but by the amount he can *impart* to his hearers we can see

how vitally important this is. If the congregation is really to understand and assimilate the message it must be relevant to the experience and related to their needs. How significant is the record concerning Philip and the Ethiopian: 'Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same Scripture, and preached unto him Jesus'.* 'At the same Scripture'—here was no set discourse, no false assumption of how much he might know. He began with him just where he found him, and so led him on. In answer to prayer we may be led to a message which will be fitting and appropriate to the needs of our hearers, and there is need of preparation in every way, equally for the Sunday morning as for the week-night service. There is a very suggestive modern rendering of Proverbs 16:1 (Moffat's trans.): 'A man may think what he will say, but at the moment the word comes to him from the Eternal'. This is not a plea for the delivery of a prepared discourse on Sunday morning: rather it is the suggestion of the need of clear thinking before we speak publicly at any time. How often meetings suffer from the expression of ill-digested thought. I remember when we were returning from Wembley after hearing Billy Graham, we picked up a member of the R.A.F. seeking a lift. When asked what he thought of Billy Graham, he replied that he seemed to be a man who knew what he had to say when he stood up to speak. That surely is both commendable and essential, but not all give that impression. It is so necessary to 'think things through' before we begin to speak as the oracles of God.

This suggests that one must never speak lightly, just to fill a gap or because he enjoys doing so. He speaks under a Divine compulsion out of a full heart after deeply pondering the ways of God, and because he has thought much, he knows what he wishes to say. Nor does he fail to take heed to his words as being unimportant, for words are the vehicles of thought, and some of the divisions in the church have arisen out of misunderstandings due to lack of careful expression. 'A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver' (Prov. 25:11); and 'the words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies' (Eccles. 12:11).

* Acts 8:35.

Conciseness

Conciseness is another desirable quality. To think much and to have a full heart does not entail a multitude of words. In fact, the precise opposite is true: the greater our clarity of thought the fewer words we normally require to express ourselves adequately. The Old Testament speaks at times in somewhat deprecatory fashion of 'many words'. Not only are we cautioned to have few words in prayer, but we are told: 'a fool's voice is known by a multitude of words' (Eccles. 5:3); and 'a fool also is full of words' (Eccles. 10:14). Years ago Mr George Goodman wrote some wise words on this subject: 'especially to the young men I would say, if you have five words that are to profit, say them, have the courage to stop, and do not go on to the ten-thousand. You may not be able to give a lengthy exhortation, therefore, when you have said that which the Lord may give you, *do not attempt to continue from fear that it should appear too little.*' Surely this is good advice to all, on all occasions of public preaching. Perhaps you recall that someone once asked, 'Why is Lord Castlereagh like a village pump?' And the answer was given as follows :

' Because he up and down his wooden arm doth sway,
And calmly, spout, spout, spout away
In one weak, washy, everlasting flood '.

This is not, of course, a plea for undue brevity. We should use as many words as the message requires, no more, no less. Martin Anstey once distinguished between those who 'have something to say' and those who 'have to say something'. There should be a ruthless pruning of all excess verbiage, a dispensing with all the padding, though not omitting that which is necessary to emphasise the point. If we speak more briefly, there may be less danger of obscuring our essential message by a multitude of words. Our essentials are—to know the point we want to make, to stick to the point, and to make the point unmistakably clear.

Then there are three further points which may not be irrelevant:

Context

Most of us are aware of the danger of taking a verse out of its context, but there is one way in which this danger may be concealed. There is a laudable desire to interpret Scripture by Scripture, which is undoubtedly right. But it is not necessarily sufficient merely to sit down with a Concordance and pick out all the references to a certain word. It is desirable to watch the context carefully, for the word in Genesis may not necessarily have the same implication as in Revelation. If the context is allowed to guide us to the meaning, we may avoid mistakes. Words indeed are fascinating things, but they must not become our masters. This was the error of the Pharisee who became a slave to the letter of the Law, failing to observe the spirit behind it, and it was with such that the Lord 'crossed swords' on such subjects as work on the Sabbath. Verbally the Pharisee could make out a good case for himself but the word was not sufficient: it was the principle behind the word that counted, and here is a further plea for clear statement as well as attention to context. Space will not here permit a discussion concerning 'spiritualising' the text as a means of interpretation, but it may be well to remember that though this is certainly correct and requisite in certain parts of the Bible, it can well be overdone when we go beyond that for which Scripture gives us any warrant. Tyndale, to whom more than any other single man we owe, under God, our English translation, was accustomed to stress the literal meaning, and was of the opinion that the greatest cause of decay of faith and of blindness was due to 'allegories'. Here again the context will help towards a true interpretation.

Courtesy

We have already seen the need of speaking with conviction in the Lord's name, but conviction is not to be confused with dogmatism. Paul, who recalled his boldness in the presentation of his message to the Thessalonians, also spoke of his 'gentleness as a nurse' with her children. There are certain fundamentals on which there can be no compromise as the principles are clearly laid down in Scripture; but there are other matters requiring interpretation where the individual point of view is to be respected

(Romans 14). I recall hearing one of our well known speakers stating (in exposition)—‘This Psalm means so and so. . .’; where I would have preferred to hear him say—‘I think’, or ‘It appears to me so and so. . .’, for where Scripture does not choose to interpret for us, a measure of humility is more becoming than dogmatism. The same is true with certain aspects of prophetic truth, for sometimes personal interpretations have been stated dogmatically, which the events of succeeding years have proved to be wrong. Courtesy and humility are not compromise: they are the due recognition of the existence of other points of view where Scripture does not apparently interpret for us. Daniel was told to seal his Book ‘till the time of the end’, and the Lord made clear that some prophetic utterances were given that when the events took place we might realise their fulfilment. We must not be wise before the time and unduly dogmatise on our own personal views.

Continuity

One of the essentials of ordinary teaching is *continuity*. A graded course is followed, to keep pace with the development of the pupil and to avoid undue gaps in knowledge as far as possible. Many of our Sunday Schools now make use of the Lesson Book which follows out the same principle. There are many obvious difficulties which would militate against adopting similar ideas in our teaching ministry, nor is it necessarily desirable, for there must be liberty and spontaneity in our ministry. But for all that there may well be a place for continuity of *theme* and *subject* in our teaching, as the Holy Spirit shall lead. The New Testament itself, makes reference to the ‘milk of the Word’¹ for babes, and ‘strong meat’ for those of riper experience. Paul’s parting words to the Ephesian elders had a solemnity all their own as he left them to face the difficult future, fraught with persecution and pernicious teaching. ‘Take heed, therefore,’ he said, ‘unto yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to *feed* the Church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood.’² Adequate feeding suggests careful choice of appropriate diet supplied in correct measure at regular intervals.—*The Harvester*.

¹ 1 Pet. 2: 2. 1 Cor. 3: 1-2.

² Acts 20: 28.