

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 Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

The Place of Systematic Theology in Preaching.

BY THE REVEREND DANIEL LAMONT, B.D., HELENSBURGH.

THERE are those who would place a mark of interrogation after the above title, or even a mark of exclamation. Many influences coming from previous generations have combined to form a common notion that doctrine is irrelevant to the Christian Life and that, *a fortiori*, it is irrelevant to Christian Preaching. The best way to meet that notion is to say that it is not true. It is a truism that life is more than doctrine, but it is a fallacy to argue that therefore doctrine has no place in life. Doctrine has a paramount place in the Christian life, and the question is one, not between doctrine and no doctrine, but between good doctrine and bad. Christ is the Life, but no less is He the Truth, and the remembrance of this warns us against any false separation of the two. The Holy Spirit, in ministering Christ to us, ministers the Truth. Doctrine means *teaching*, and the charter of Christian doctrine is in God, the One who is True.

More worthy of attention are those who hold that Systematic Theology, while having a place of its own in the life of the Church, should be kept severely in the background in preaching. *Ars celare artem*. Theology, it is said, is a discipline whose value for preaching lies in providing a man's words with atmosphere and system. Its energy, but none of its mechanism, should pass into the sermon. All this is entirely in point as against a barren intellectualism, but not as against the vital declaration of Christian Truth. Nobody need deny that the mechanism of theology must be strictly eliminated from preaching, but theology is more than mechanism. It is not a purely formal science like grammar or logic. It has a content which is at least as real and objective as that of any other science, and that content, in its whole magnitude, is the theme of Christian Preaching. If theology were no more than mechanism, it would have little energy to impart to preaching or to anything else. The requisite energy presupposes a knowledge of Christian Truth.

With the qualifications implied in what has been already said, Systematic Theology has a vital place in Christian Preaching. This is far from saying that no one can preach Christ who has not

undergone a theological discipline. As in the early Church there was an order of evangelists as well as an order of teachers, so has the evangelist a secure place in the Church of to-day. There are evangelists who are richly honoured of God in leading souls out into the Light, and who cannot be suspected of complicity with theological books or colleges. More power to them! But this does not touch the point at issue. People need not only to be led into the Light, but to keep walking in the Light. The Church has suffered from many false assumptions, and from none more than this, that when once a man has given his heart to Christ his inward spiritual task has been completed. Life only begins for him at that turning-point, and since life and growth cannot be dissociated he must grow. The process of becoming a full-grown Christian man implies a growth into the truth, as truth is in Jesus.

Healthy growth in the Christian life presupposes growth in Christian Knowledge. That fact provides the basal justification of doctrinal preaching. There are many considerations which endorse this general position, and a few of these may be indicated here.

I.

History proves that the Christian Religion suffers whenever there is any diminution of intellectual interest in it. It may be replied that this is putting the cart before the horse, and that more to the point is the converse proposition that decline in intellectual interest is one effect of a general fall in the tide of life. There is no need to deny the converse, but it is written large in history that the high tide cannot long be sustained when the mind has ceased to be eager and alert. This is true even of the individual, but more manifestly true of the larger and longer life of a society. The quick decay of power in pietistic movements, and the efforts made by some of the wisest mystics to give their experience a foothold in the kingdom of the mind, bear testimony to the imperious demand that Christians must give sustained and systematic thought to the contents of their faith.

II.

Expository preaching misses fire when it is not articulated in a scheme of systematic instruction. The reason is that in that case it is not true exposition. When one proposes to exhibit some facet of Christian truth to a congregation he must, either there and then, or at some time, make the setting of his subject clear to his listeners. He must make it his ambition 'to declare the whole counsel of God.' Alike in dealing with historical and with ethical magnitudes he must somehow make the people feel the full force of the gospel. St. Paul could not even intimate a collection without linking it up with the mightiest motives in the universe. If it is said that our Lord, and not St. Paul, is the Great Teacher, we agree, for the parables of our Lord give the very best confirmation of the point which we are now trying to make. In each parable He fills the soul with one definite truth, but He obviously requires us to give like heed to 'all the parables.' Besides, in any one parable, how wonderful is the co-ordination of His specific theme with the whole magnitude of His message! Even when He is commenting on the human folly of rejecting the Kingdom, the abounding generosity of the King shines through all His words. Thus the Parable of the Great Supper is rightly included among the Parables of Grace. While its 'didactic drift' is to show how men in the mass allow their own preoccupations to blunt their minds to the urgency of the Great Invitation, the background rings all the while with the Glad Tidings. Nowhere is Systematic Theology more in demand than in the exposition of the words of our Lord.

III.

The disadvantages of specialism are more pronounced in Theology than in any other science. This arises from the nature of its contents and need not be argued. The gap between the trained theologian and the average Church member is much too wide and entails a serious loss for both. One need not be very old to remember a time when the gap was not so wide. The writer can recall the earnestness and keenness of mind with which his grandmother used to discuss the doctrine of the Epistle to the Romans, and he then felt instinctively that her interest in such high and deep themes was in

organic relation to the strength and beauty of her character. An age which is excessively addicted to novelties may smile over those old amateur theologians, but were the old folk to return and look into the religious minds of their successors, their faces would wear an aspect more becoming than a smile. Earnest people are everywhere deploring the modern ignorance and neglect of the Bible, but it is still too little recognized that one principal cause of the fatality lies in the modern preacher's abandonment of doctrinal preaching. If the Bible's appeal to the mind is not heard from our pulpits, how can we expect the race to maintain its interest in the Word of Truth?

IV.

Uncertainty and confusion abound with regard to the very core of the Christian Faith. They abound in the minds of Church members, and if this is so with the green tree, what of the dry? We lose many potential Church workers, and the work of many of those who remain faithful is paralysed, through this grave uncertainty. It may be boldly affirmed that many of our best Church members, who matter most for Christian leadership, are longing for clear teaching from our pulpits on the fundamentals of the Faith. They believe, and rightly, that if they are to prepare themselves for battle they ought to hear a trumpet which gives forth no uncertain sound. Discourses on sociology and psychology, literature, art, the world-situation and the like, do not meet the Church's deepest need. Discourses which keep moral questions dangling in the air are of little or no use to anybody. The primary need of the Church at this moment is a clear, convincing, passionate declaration of that which lies at the foundation of all Christian life. There are many who are coming and saying: 'Sir, we would see Jesus,' and no preacher can comply with that request without making his appeal to all the mind there is to appeal to. There is no Christian experience which is not penetrated with doctrine, and if we have to deplore a meagre experience to-day, something at least of the blame lies at the door of those who are set to declare the whole truth of the gospel and who spend their strength upon its fringes. And if we are not fit to use plainness of speech where such plainness is indispensable, we should consider the question of our vocation.