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## PERSUASION IN PREACHING; ITS NATURE AND IMPORTANCE.\*

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My only excuse for selecting a second time, the subject of Persuasion for my Opening Address, is the fact that the seven intervening years have, to my mind, emphasized the importance of it both to those who are studying the art, and also to those who are beginning the actual work of preaching. To really preach, is to persuade. Persuasion is the end the preacher should have in view: power of persuasion the thing he should covet; the art of persuasion the thing he should study. The preacher is not a teacher. He should teach, and desire to be "apt to teach;" but always with a view to persuasion. His mission is not merely to present the truth to men, but so to present it that they will obey. The preacher is not a messenger. He should have a message, and should deliver it faithfully "whether they will hear or whether they will forbear;" but he must leave nothing undone, save only tampering with the message, that they shall hear. As he stands "to declare all the counsel of God," his prayer of preparation should be—

"O Spirit that dost prefer  
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,  
Instruct me. —————

What in me is dark,  
Illumine; what is low, raise and support;  
That in the height of this great argument  
I may assert Eternal Providence,  
And *justify* the ways of God to men."

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\*The Annual Address before the Colgate Seminary, Sept. 26th, 1905.

## I.

What is persuasion? Let me say first of all, that persuasion is not a formal thing.

In my boyhood I sat under the preaching of a good man of no mean parts, who, as far as I can now recall, never failed to close his sermons with an appeal to the unsaved; and those appeals always began with the set phrase, "And now my dear unconverted friends." What he said in those appeals I seldom heard; I doubt if any of us did. Just as the benediction is to some people the signal to reach for their hats, so that phrase was to us the signal to stop listening. We stopped primarily I suppose, because he had served notice thereby that he was after us; and we were not disposed to be caught. But it was easy to stop because we had found from the few samples we had tested, that, no matter how interesting the sermon might be up to that point, the rest would consist chiefly of exclamation and platitude. Now the good man had the correct theory, but he was not within sight of the spirit of it. That was no more persuasion, than a wooden nutmeg is a nutmeg. The theory of never closing a sermon without some word to the unsaved, rightly understood and applied, does not, in my opinion, need defense. The exigencies under which every true sermon is delivered demand nothing less. But a formal appeal like that is not a genuine word to the unsaved; and the man who gives it supposing that he is thus performing the high duty of persuasion, has only persuaded himself; into an error. The *form* of persuasion may best be absent sometimes, that the essence of persuasion may be most effectively present.

The story is told that Daniel Webster was once pressing a suit to secure pay for a large order of wagon wheels which his clients had delivered, for which payment had been refused on the ground that the wheels furnished were not as good as the sample. The sample wheel, and

some of those supplied under the contract, were brought into court and placed in evidence. After the witnesses had been examined, the counsel for the defense arose and addressed the jury in a speech constructed after the most approved style. He dwelt upon the sacredness of contracts; and asked what would become of the business interests of the land if men were permitted to violate both spirit and letter, and then recover payment the same as if the contract had been faithfully observed. He described a possible accident which might result from the breaking of one of these inferior wheels; where innocent users were dashed to their death, leaving wives and children in sorrow and poverty. He appealed to the jury as honest men who knew their duty, to faithfully discharge their trust and rebuke this shameless attempt at fraud. When he had finished, Mr. Webster arose, and, after formally addressing the court, turned to the jury, and pointing to the wheels, said, "Gentlemen of the jury, look at 'em;" and resumed his seat. Tradition has it that the jury gave him the verdict without leaving the box. The formal appeal was absent, but the essential principles of persuasion were observed. He showed faith in his case, and confidence in the jury. His opponent appealed without persuading; he persuaded without appealing. It was the height of the art of persuasion.

It was my privilege to hear Charles H. Spurgeon and another well-known preacher of London, in their own pulpits, on the same Sabbath. I have not forgotten the object-lesson presented regarding methods of persuasion. Mr. Spurgeon gave a vivid picture of the graciousness of Christ toward his followers, even the weakest. As he went on to portray the considerateness and tenderness of Jesus, the great audience was hushed and weeping. Then the preacher, raising himself to full height and lifting his hand to compel attention, said, "He has appointed me one of his recruiting sergeants, and I have authority to say to every unsaved soul in this Tabernacle: If you want this Christ for your master he bids you welcome."

I do not believe there was one person without the Savior that heard those words who did not receive an impulse to seek him then and there. That evening we listened to the other well-known preacher. The sermon, addressed to young men, was one of rare beauty and tenderness. It too presented Christ faithfully and attractively; closing with an appeal to young men, in the fullness of their strength, with all their wealth of physical and mental powers, to consecrate them to the Master. "He needs you in the contest that is waging. Your strong right arm can carry his banner far to the front. The world needs you; the world's Savior needs you. Oh, I beseech you consecrate those powers you possess to the Master's service. Turn from selfish pursuits and aid the world's rightful King to come to his own." Such, as nearly as I can recall, were the final words. All very beautiful, and uttered in tenderest tones; but I said to my companion as we left the chapel, "I don't believe that appeal scratched the surface of the purpose of one young man present." Mr. Spurgeon, perhaps, was at his best that morning, it was the last sermon he ever preached; the other may have been at his weakest that evening. My purpose is not to compare the men, only this—the one without seeming to try, persuaded; the other tried hard, and failed. Possibly it was more in the way of saying it than in the thing said; possibly it was in my mood, with which you will not sympathize; but the impression remains after fourteen years. The one seemed like the deferential presentation of a contribution bag; the other like the proffering of a royal invitation on a tray of pure gold.

No, persuasion is not a formal thing, so many lines of appeal, so many words of expostulation and entreaty; there may be all these, and no persuasion; there may be none of these, and yet persuasion irresistible.

The fashion in public utterance changes like fashion in other things. It is simpler and more familiar than it was a hundred or even fifty years ago. For my part I rejoice in the change. I regard the recoil from the old form

of appeals as both healthy and necessary. Healthy because the old appeals would be unreal; necessary, because this age will not listen to them. But, unless I mistake, the recoil has gone altogether too far. The pulpit of to-day has, turned, as it seems to me, not only from the old forms of persuasion; it has turned, or is in danger of turning, from persuasion itself. The new conception of preaching seems to place the intellect or the sensibilities rather than the will at the center. Homiletically this is rank heresy; resulting in the lowering of the position of the pulpit, and the diminishing of its power.

Now there have been equally great changes in speech as related to worldly matters; but the children of the world have been wiser than the children of light. They too have changed their methods; but they have not lost sight of the thing to be done. Take for example the selling of goods. The old merchant, when once a possible customer crossed the threshold of his store, wrestled with him by the hour to make a sale. He flattered, browbeat, pleaded, reduced the price, anything to sell. Now all this is changed—except the purpose to sell. And the mad rush on bargain days witnesses to the fact that the people are still being persuaded to buy. Lest this should seem to prove too much for my purpose, and appear to be an argument for the substitution of something else in the place of preaching, I would remind you that the great wholesale houses throughout the land rely more than ever upon the personal touch and the winning word. The great army of commercial travelers is increasing faster in proportion, than the population or the volume of business; and you do not need to be told what tireless students of the art of persuasion these “Knights of the Road” are. In some matters the preacher may well learn from them. Among other things, they might teach him that there is a time for speech, and a time for silence—but both with a view to persuasion. And thus it is clear, to me at least, that in all the changes that take place in tastes and methods, the aim and purpose of

preaching remains the same. It is to persuade men.

## II.

What then is persuasion? I answer, (and students of Broadus will note that I am giving a judgment not a definition), persuasion is the intelligent dominance of a definite purpose to persuade; influencing the spirit, manner and matter of a speaker. Persuasion employs all proper methods; it is bound to none. It is free in its choice of means; it is in bondage to a single end. It does many things; but it does them that it may do the one thing more effectively. The foundation of persuasion lies deep. It is in the spirit and temper of the man; in his attitude toward his fellows; in his conception of his work.

I say that an appropriate spirit belongs to persuasion. The purpose to persuade tends, on the one hand, to produce this spirit; and, on the other, by emphasizing its importance, to compel the man to seek for it constantly and earnestly. Persuasion inclines toward gentleness rather than sternness; it woos more than it commands; it pleads with, but does not denounce; it grieves over, but does not despise.

Now this spirit which belongs to true persuasion, determines the attitude of a real preacher toward his fellows. This spirit, controlling conduct and utterance, will tend to place him in right relations with men; and his relations with men, rightly conceived, will lead him to long for, and cultivate this spirit. Persuasion must be in the man before it is in the sermon. It is a spirit that pervades the sermon; not a mould in which the sermon is cast.

I said also that persuasion had to do with a man's conception of his work. Now there are diversities of gifts; some pastors, some evangelists, some teachers. A call to do Christian work is general; a call to preach is specific. Some successful ministers, it would seem, were never called to preach; or, if they were, have failed to do much of it. Every successful minister is called to do many

things besides to preach. The most successful ministers are called primarily to preach; and they do it. They may be excellent pastors, efficient organizers, apt teachers; but their throne is their pulpit. And preaching is persuasion; and where that is, and is sought, you have definiteness of conception of one's work. Perhaps some of you brethren of the student body are, as yet, conscious only of the general call to serve Christ; but if you believe you have a commission to preach, then welcome the limitations imposed, and prepare to do your work; not something else.

He who is to become a persuader of men for God, needs a varied preparation in order that he may do this well. He needs a thorough training in elocution. The most faithful practice is worth while. Read the testimony of Mr. Beecher, given to the Yale students, regarding his own painstaking work in this direction; and if it was of value to him, who may wisely dispense with it? But, he is not to become an elocutionist. He must be a careful student of style; compelling the great writers and speakers to share with him their secrets. But, he is not to become a mere stylist. The preacher should be familiar with the great movements in the Christian church. But, he is not to become a specialist in church history. The principles of interpretation demand his devoted study. He must, if possible, be able to read his Bible in the original tongues; for the most effective preaching is always biblical. But, he is to be the maker of expository sermons, not expositions. Over the profound themes of Christian theology he must brood, and agonize, and pray. But, even here he may build no home; he is not to be a discoverer of truth, but a disseminator of truth. The great verities as revealed in the Divine Word, and verified by his own experience and the Christian consciousness, these he is to persuade men to accept and live. His passion is not to know; but to know, that he may tell. The angel of his vision did not point up the mountain, to the hiding place of great treasure; but down to the valley, filled with starving men. He longs to know of that treasure, but if



he finds it, he will not stay there to exploit its wealth; but, seizing as much as he can carry, will rush back to save his dying parish.

The art of persuasion is not something peculiar to preaching, but is of general use in life. The child turns to it early, and often acquires an adroitness in its use that is the marvel of those who have forgotten about their own childhood; the man who sells or buys reduces it to an exact science; and the traditions of the bar abound with instances of the triumphs of famous pleaders. But there is one thing about persuasion as employed by the true preacher that is unique. The merchant persuades that he may sell his goods; the lawyer to win his case; but the true preacher only that he may do men good. It is as if the merchant forgot his own profits, and sought only to send into the homes of his customers those things that would minister to their comfort and well-being. It is as if the lawyer sought only to persuade the jury only to do right.

I have in my library a book that held a place of honor on the parlor table in my father's house. It is a life of Adoniram Judson. Stamped in gold on the cover is a design representing Mr. Judson preaching to a native of Burma; and beneath are the words of Paul: "I seek not yours, but you." That expresses the characteristic of true preaching—seeking men only to do them good. Persuading them into the kingdom, not to add to personal success, not to strengthen one's denomination or church; but solely to do them good. The best missionary sermons even, are those that are prepared with less thought about an increased collection, than about enlarged hearts. We seek not yours but you; your best good; your salvation; your growth in Christly character. This is the one motive in all real preaching. Alas, the inward shame that comes with the discovery of the base alloys that are mixed with the gold of our devotion; and we realize that we are not better preachers, because we are not better men.

I presume that here are some good people who would be disposed to quarrel with me because I place this motive of seeking the good of men at the center of true preaching, instead of placing there the glory of God. Well, I will not quarrel with them, for if they understand what I mean, and what the glory of God means, there is nothing to quarrel about. These two things are one. Whatever is for man's good is always for God's glory. God's glory is like the rays of the sun; which at the same time are the sun's glory, and the earth's health. And I have justification for stating the motive thus from God's own expression of his thought. "And God said to Jonah, Should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" God was thinking, not of himself, but of the Ninevites—yes, and of their cattle. He was grieved that his servant should so easily forget men, while thinking of his own reputation as a prophet. When one has caught something of the real significance of the death of Christ for a lost world, to place man's good as the central motive of preaching, is but to express the Divine thought in human terms.

### III.

I have thus attempted to present a few judgments regarding the essential nature of persuasion, in the hope of inciting my young brethren to study the art of it; and make it characteristic of their preaching. According to the plan I had in mind for this address, it remains for me now, only to show the importance of persuasion because of the effect of a definite purpose to persuade upon the preacher himself.

1. And first I ask you to note that such a purpose, clearly conceived, tends to give an exalted conception of the worth of man.

What is this being for whom one is to subordinate his literary culture and love of learning? for whose sake,

even the truth is to be sought, rather than for its own? this being whose persuasion for God is the supreme thing to which we are consecrated? These are questions that will press for an answer.

It seems natural for men not to place a very high estimate upon men. However well we may regard ourselves and some other men, we are not disposed to hold men in general as being of very great worth. If it is not natural to thus judge, it certainly is very easy. Many men are weak; many are ignorant; many seem devoid of high moral sense; most are selfish; some are cruel; some are swayed by bestial passions. Not long ago, in our own land, men bought and sold men. To-day they are used like machines; driven like beasts; fleeced and befooled for other men's profit. Mr. Barnum professed to believe that the public liked to be humbugged; the merchant laughs at the gullibility of the bargain hunter; the lawyer laughs at the jury he twists around his finger; and the politician writes it as a part of his creed that the people are mostly fools—and the rest knaves.

How men are divided into classes, and set over against each other! First there are the great racial divisions; then the national; and within these the political, social, economic, intellectual, moral, and even religious—the one despising, or suspecting, or hating, or patronizing the other; but nowhere reverence for man, because he is man. Even that ringing line of Robert Burns,

“A man 's a man for a' that,”

is after all, not a note of recognition of man's essential dignity as man, but the defiant answer that “Honest Poverty” flings back at the pretensions of mere wealth and rank.

And men are so hard to help. So blind to their highest interests; so base in their ingratiitudes; so fickle in their attachments; so feeble in the setting of their wills toward the good; so strong in their love for sin. The reformer struggles with them for a while, and then gives up in disgust. The righteous prophet, flaming with hatred for sin,

ends by hating the sinner too.

But with God all this is different. He loves, not only men, but man; not only Enoch and Abraham and David, but man. Not only Israel, but all flesh. He has made him in his own image, and placed him in the seat of honor. This was the marvel of the writer of the eighth psalm: "When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, The moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?"

For thou hast made him but little lower than God;  
And crownest him with glory and honor.  
Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy  
hands;  
Thou hast put all things under his feet."

And amid the awful havoc sin has wrought, God does not despair; the very greatness of the ruin, but reminds him of man's inherent dignity. In the wreckage of the fair temple, he sees "the beams still overlaid with gold; and the stones set with costly jewels." He will not give him up. No, not that, but this—he was not taken unawares; he saw this from the beginning; he counted the cost before he made him a living soul. Nothing in heaven shall be esteemed too precious to be used in the rescue. From the foundation of the world he prepared himself a lamb for the sacrifice, in the person of his only begotten Son. The Psalmist was amazed that God should set man over the works of his hands; what would he have thought if he could have seen Calvary?

This is God's estimate of man. And God makes no mistakes; he knows values. Oh, a wondrous race is in the making here! Through pain and tears, through struggle and burden bearing, and, through the blood of the cross, there is coming forth a people for God's own possession—created by himself, and then redeemed by himself—for himself. And eligibility comes not from birth or any

earthly accident—it comes from just being a man. God will work this miracle of grace on any man who does not hinder him.

This is God's estimate of man; and in some real sense it must become the estimate of every one who is a successful persuader of men for God. Martin Luther's old teacher used to salute his boys as he entered the school-room, because among them there might be the future leaders. He saluted a possibility; the possibility that a leader in the making might be there. The real preacher has learned a better lesson. As he stands before men, he salutes them. He too salutes a possibility, but in another sense; not the possibility that *may be*, but that *is* in every human soul.

2. Helping to a true conception of the worth of man, the purpose to persuade will help also to develop a sympathy with man. There can be no persuasion without this; and very necessity will compel the seeking for it. But there will be better aid than the whip of necessity; for appreciation begets sympathy. Believing in men, creates a desire to understand them. To know their point of view; their hopes and fears; their struggles; and their enemies of every sort. Dull people become interesting, repulsive people attractive, if we can look, ever so little, through God's eyes at the men he loves.

3. And when appreciation of the worth of man has come, and with it, sympathy with him; then will come also something of the mind that was in Christ Jesus when he took upon himself the form of a servant. The service of man will appear, what it really is, a high honor.

What strange changes love works. The missionary lately come to his far-off field, surrounded by strange people and barbarous sights, puts it in his prayer that he may be permitted, please God, to go home to die surrounded by those who are of his own blood and color and speech. But after he has served a third or a half of a century, then, home—where is it, but where he has done his work? And his own people—who, if not those who

are his own children in the Gospel,—“his joy and his crown.” He prefers now to have their dusky hands minister to him in the last hours; and close his eyes when dead.

To such a career, brethren of the Seminary, you are looking forward. I offer you my congratulations. And when the work of redemption has been completed, and the time for the manifestation of the sons of God has arrived, may it be yours to stand in the presence of the King, surrounded by a goodly company of those, who through your persuation, have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.