

## ARTICLE V.

## THE STRUCTURE OF A SERMON.— THE TEXT.

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[In the present Volume of the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, pp. 534–573, is the first part of this Article, devoted to the definition of the words, “Sermon,” “Preach,” “Text;” the Advantages of Preaching from Biblical Texts; Objections to the Use of Texts; Different Methods of Selecting Texts; the Fitnesses of Passages of the Bible for Texts of Sermons. Under the last-named head it is stated that passages of the Bible have a fitness to be used as texts, when the passages, I. involve a moral principle; II. most aptly represent the spirit of the Bible; III. have a divine authority; IV. refer, as they stand in the Bible, to the same object which they refer to in the sermon; V. are complete in their grammatical construction and express a complete idea which is the complete idea of the sermon.]

VI. The appropriateness of a biblical passage to the subject, the writer, the hearer, and the occasion<sup>1</sup> of a sermon gives it a fitness to be used as a text. This remark may seem tautological; but a passage may be entirely appropriate in some of its relations, while it is, on the whole, unfit to be used as the basis of a sermon.

1. The text should be appropriate to the theme of the discourse.

Where other reasons allow it should be co-extensive with the subject; general, if the subject be so; specific, if the theme be specific. Bishop Latimer was fond of preaching on the words: “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning” (Rom. xv. 4), and of introducing under these words a large variety of particular discussions for which he might have found particularly adjusted texts. Devoting his entire sermon to a reprimand of his auditors for their demeanor in the house of worship; their habit of sitting upright with their eyes open in the time

<sup>1</sup> Ferguson’s sermon on the day before the battle of Sedgemoor was from a text singularly appropriate to the subject, preacher, hearers, and occasion, all united. — See Macaulay’s *History of England* (American ed.), Vol. i. p. 561.

of public devotion ; of standing with the face to the choir and the back to the pulpit in the time of singing ; of conversing aloud and on secular themes, as soon as the benediction was uttered, a youthful preacher took for his text the imposing announcement : " Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up, by putting you in remembrance " (2 Pet. i. 13). The speaker's physical aspect gave promise that he would remain a long time in his fleshly tabernacle ; but he introduced his discourse with words which sounded like the dying words of an aged counsellor. He was commenting on the minor improprieties of worship ; his text was distinctively appropriate to the most solemn duties of our probationary state. He might have found a more fitting epigraph in 1 Cor. xiv. 40 ; or, on such a familiar topic, he might have imitated some of the church Fathers, and given to his audience, not a distinctive sermon, but a lecture without a text (see § 2. I. above).

Where other reasons allow, a verse appropriate to one relation of truth should not be applied to an opposite relation. " The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart " (Ex. x. 20). This clause is designed to suggest a doctrine which nearly all theists, heterodox and orthodox, admit as valid. If a man intend to preach upon it, he should unfold some such truth as that by the laws of nature, which are the laws of the Creator, the iniquity of a man indurates his moral sensibilities. One clergyman, however, chose this text for a sermon, the main proposition of which was : The Lord did not harden Pharaoh's heart. " Which are we to believe, your text or your sermon ? " was the query addressed to him by a bewildered hearer. Moses declares that the Lord *did* produce a certain result ; the preacher's whole design was to declare that the Lord did *not* produce a certain result. The design of the preacher should have been to maintain a positive statement, and to prove that the statement is entirely harmonious with the truth that God is not the author nor the abettor of sin. Discoursing on Heb. x. 26, 27 : " If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the

truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment, and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries," Bishop Hoadley proposed to show the absurdity of the doctrine that pious men who sin wilfully are denied all hope of pardon. In a sermon on Eph. ii. 8: "By grace are ye saved through faith," he denounced the error of relying on faith alone for salvation.

But does not this method of discussing a text arrest attention? Is it not like the collision of flint and steel, emitting hidden light? We reply: all the startling observations which the minister may need to make on the incongruity between the apparent meaning of his text and the real truth, he may make in his introductory explanation. That is the place for arousing his hearers to meditate on the real import of the Biblical words. But may there not be a text on which a minister may startle his hearers by seeming to controvert it? Yes. It has been said already that inspired men have recorded the sayings of men who were uninspired. These sayings may imply an ignorance of the truth, or a disbelief of it. If a minister discoursing on one of these sayings come out in opposition to it, his discourse may be appropriate to his text viewed in some of its relations. "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John i. 46), is the question prefixed to the sermon. "Come and see" may be the answer; and the proposition of the sermon may be: The duty of fair investigation, or the worth of a candid spirit, or the sin of prejudice. "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job xiv. 14) is a question propounded by a person who had not learned the doctrine of the resurrection. "Yes," may be the preacher's response; and the prominent aim of his sermon may be to show that, improbable as the resurrection of the body may have appeared to a man living under the old economy, it appears certain to a man living under the new. The gospel has brought life and immortality to light, and a sermon may arouse men by the contrasts between the gospel and the law. Here, as elsewhere, *exceptio probat regulam*. "*Where other reasons*

*allow*," then, and then only, need the words of the text be synonymous with the phraseology of the main proposition of the discourse.

While a minister should look for the pertinency of his text to his theme, he should never be satisfied with a merely verbal pertinency. A well-known clergyman delivering a discourse on Eccl. ix. 10 "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," proposed to explain the anatomical and physiological properties of the hand. His sermon was an epitome of Sir Charles Bell's Treatise on that subject. In Judg. iv. 20 we read of Sisera and Jael that "he said unto her, Stand in the door of the tent; and it shall be, when any man doth come and inquire of thee, and say, Is there any man here? that thou shalt say, No." These last four words: "Thou shalt say No," formed the text of an American sermon on the importance of decision of character. Dr. Campbell had previously condemned such an application of the words to such a theme. It may seem incredible, but it is true, that another clergyman, perhaps aiming to imitate this fantastic use of a text, preached a sermon on the same virtue, decision of character, from the words: "In those days they shall say No." The entire passage is (Jer. xxxi. 29): "In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape and the children's teeth are set on edge." One of the most remarkable instances of the text selected on the ground of a mere verbal suggestion is found in a sermon printed by an eminent pulpit orator on the question, "May I go to the theatre?" The sermon advocates the theatre, gives various reasons for attending it, but is prefaced by the text (Acts xix. 31), "That he would not adventure himself into the theatre." In the introduction the preacher says: "The text and its incidents have nothing to do with my subject. It simply affords me the canonical handle without which many think there is no sermon." The scholastic writers on Homiletics were wont to say that such a proposition derived from such a text is an instance of the *Themata synthetica arbitraria*, as they applied the phrase *Themata*

*synthetica naturalia* to such propositions as are evolved directly and naturally from the text.<sup>1</sup>

2. The text should be appropriate to the minister himself. He must know his own character and position, and should cultivate that sense, which is better than a proof, of what is fitting. He cannot be easily taught what he does not instinctively feel. One minister may do what another may not. A divine of large experience and venerable age may discourse upon a text which a young man would seem to be presumptuous in choosing. The youthful pastor whose stature was small, and his voice feminine, and who discoursed before an assembly of clergymen on one of the most intricate verses in the Epistle to the Romans, and attempted to make his clerical fathers understand the metaphysical implications of that Epistle, was advised to preach his next sermon from Ps. cxxxi. 1, 2. A pastor who had endeared himself to his people by his faithful and affectionate services to them, while he had been afflicted in a degree which awakened their tenderest sympathies, preached on his forty-first birth-day from Deut. viii. 2: "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness to humble thee and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments or no." If a robust man, on reaching his forty-first year in outward prosperity, had signalized his birth-day by discoursing from this text before a congregation who had never detected his special worth, he would have been justly deemed egotistical. The occasions are rare on which it is appropriate for a man to choose a text suggesting his own history. In the general

<sup>1</sup> Dr. James Dana of New Haven, who was well versed in the ante-revolutionary history of Massachusetts, was fond of describing the commotion produced by a Massachusetts pastor discoursing to an assembly of which the Provincial Governor and other British officers were members. The text of the discourse was Job xx. 6-9: "Though his Excellency mount up to the heavens, and his head reach unto the clouds; Yet he shall perish for ever like his own dung: they which have seen him shall say, Where is he? He shall fly away as a dream, and shall not be found; yea, he shall be chased away as a vision of the night. The eye also which saw him shall see him no more; neither shall his place any more behold him."

it is the more becoming, at least the safer way to let himself alone. He should avoid the semblance of "the one man power." Under the guidance of a cultivated taste, however, and of a true humility, he may give a liveliness to his ministrations by deviating from the general rule, and choosing a text which intimates his own record. President Edwards in his "Farewell Sermon, preached at the First Precinct in Northampton after the people's public rejection of their minister, and renouncing their relation to him as pastor of the church there," introduces the following remarks: "The prophet Jeremiah (xxv. 3) puts the people in mind how long he had labored among them in the work of the ministry; '*From the thirteenth year of Josiah, the son of Amon, king of Judah, even unto this day, (that is, the three and twentieth year,) the word of the Lord hath come unto me, and I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking.*' I am not about to compare myself with the prophet Jeremiah; but in this respect I can say as he did, that *I have spoken the word of God to you, unto the three and twentieth year, rising early and speaking.* It was three and twenty years, the fifteenth day of last February, since I have labored in the work of the ministry, in the relation of a pastor to this church and congregation. And though my strength has been weakness, having always labored under great infirmity of body, beside my insufficiency for so great a charge in other respects, yet I have not spared my feeble strength, but have exerted it for the good of your souls. I can appeal to you, as the apostle does to his hearers (Gal. iv. 13), '*Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh, I preached the gospel unto you.*'"<sup>1</sup> The President had such a reputation that he would not have been immodest if he had introduced the words of Jeremiah as the text of the farewell sermon; still it was more appropriate to intercalate them into the series of his remarks than to make them prominent as the prefix of his entire discourse. On the twenty-fourth of January, 1819, Dr. Edward Payson, intending to leave his parish in Portland for a few weeks,

<sup>1</sup> Edwards's Works (Dwight's ed.), Vol. i. p. 641.

and to labor in behalf of the American Education Society in the Counties of Essex and Middlesex in Massachusetts, delivered a discourse on Rom. xv. 30-32: "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints; that I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed." This text awakened the deep interest of Dr. Payson's hearers; but, had he not been the object of their special veneration, it would have been wiser for him not to magnify the importance of his journey by so public and biblical an allusion to it.

3. The text should be appropriate to the hearers, as well as to the preacher. It thus makes the impression that the sermon is alive, and, instead of wandering about in the air, is searching the hearts of real men. When Providence directs the attention of hearers to a particular topic, it is opportune for the preacher to choose a text relating to that topic. He thus coincides with the intimations of the Spirit of God. There have been times when an entire community have been aroused by some ruinous and scandalous crime, and when some of the imprecatory Psalms have appeared to be appropriate themes of discourse. At such times the meaning of those Psalms can be detected more accurately than in days of peace and quiet. In 1688, when James II. of England ordered his clergy to read from the pulpit, on an appointed Sabbath, one of his obnoxious Declarations, and many of his clergy refused to violate their consciences in reading it, Samuel Wesley, a curate in London, one of the recusants, and father of John and Charles Wesley, "took for his text that day the noble answer of the three Jews to the Chaldaean tyrant: 'Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up'" (Dan. iii. 18).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Macaulay's History of England, Vol. ii. p. 327. Soon after this event,

It must always be remembered, however, that there is but a single step from the sublime to the ridiculous. Between a marked propriety and a marked impropriety the line is often almost imperceptible. Several preachers, on the Sabbath after their church edifices have been burned, have interested their audiences by sermons from Isa. lxiv. 11: "Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burnt up with fire, and all our pleasant things are laid waste." Such texts are appropriate. The dignity of the occasion warrants them. But when the Commissioners of a city in Great Britain had been compelled by economical reasons to extinguish nearly all their street lamps, and one of the city clergymen devoted the next Sunday to a sermon on Matt. xxv. 8, "Our lamps are gone out," he violated the proprieties of the pulpit.

The very attempt to be appropriate often leads to the grossest indecorum. A preacher may choose a text which is pertinent, which is even pointed, which individualizes a congregation or a particular member of it; but when he merges the individualism into a personality, his pertinence easily sinks into impertinence. The distinction between a text which individualizes the hearers and a text which can be charged with personality is this: The former is selected in order to improve the character of the people, without injuring the character of the persons who are individualized, or exposing them to public censure; the latter is chosen with the aim of subjecting a congregation, or some member of it, to public reproach. This aim *may* be combined with the governing motive of doing good to the community by blaming one member of it. Some ministers appear to think that a text is appropriate if it hits an auditor; but if it hurts and harms him more than the public welfare demands, it is signally inappropriate. In striking at

on the evening of "Black Friday," when the seven prelates were committed to prison, "they instantly hastened to the chapel" and united in the divine service. It chanced that in the second lesson were these words: "In all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in distresses, in strifes, in imprisonments. All zealous clergymen were delighted with this coincidence," etc. — Macaulay's History, Vol. ii. p. 338.

one person, we may slay more than one. We may design to probe a wound, but in probing may simply inflame it. Our sermons while aiming to give an exact description of a man, may lose all harmony with the general aim of the pulpit, with the general sense of honor which may adorn the community. "Up, get ye out of this place," was the text, cited from Gen. xix. 14, for a sermon preached in a town which was peculiarly sensitive because its neighbors termed it Sodom. The preacher and his family were doomed to obey the mandate of his text forthwith. We do not mean to assert that no pastor is ever allowed to individualize auditors so far as to bring down upon them the censure of the community. One pastor can do what another can not.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes there is wisdom in boldness; there is imprudence in caution. Sometimes a minister can reprove, and still be trusted as a parent rebuking a child in public. One exigency may demand a personal intimation in a text, when nearly all other exigencies may dispense with it. Just here is needed the wisdom of the serpent, as well as the harmlessness of the dove. It is a tradition that a strong-minded young man, a ringleader in the irreligious plots of the community, was struck down as if an electric shock had prostrated him, and was prevented from executing one of his mischievous schemes, by the *tone* in which Dr. Emmons repeated, and by the *pointed* comments with which he accompanied, the words: "Then Saul (who also is called Paul), filled with the Holy Ghost, *set his eyes on him*, and said, *O full of all subtlety*, and all *mischief*,—thou CHILD OF THE DEVIL, thou enemy of all

<sup>1</sup> A young English clergyman, in the time of James I., was called to preach before the Vice Chancellor of Oxford who was well-known to be a somnolent hearer. The youth hit upon the text Matt. xxvi. 40: "What! could ye not watch with me one hour?" At the conclusion of every lengthened paragraph he repeated the question, waking up the Vice Chancellor too often. That dignity complained to the Archbishop; but the young man defended himself so wittily that the Archbishop was pleased with him, and procured for him an invitation to preach before the King. James I. was noted then for his instability. The text which the youth announced was James i. 6: "Nothing wavering." "He is at me already," exclaimed the King as soon as the words were uttered. Still the gifts of the young man were so rich that James was pleased with him.

righteousness, — *will* thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord ?”<sup>1</sup>

4. The text should be appropriate to the occasion on which the discourse which it prefaces is delivered. We are sometimes unable to account for the influence of particular sermons. When they were preached they produced a great effect, but years afterward, when they are read, they have but little power. Other sermons, as published, appear to be far more attractive, yet as delivered they failed to gain attention even. One among other causes of this disparity is, that the former class of sermons were, and the latter class were not, carefully fitted to the circumstances in which they were spoken. Two octavo volumes of John Newton’s discourses, published in the year 1786, contain paragraphs which in themselves have not, but in the circumstances of their delivery must have had, an extraordinary power. They were preached in 1784 and 1785 at and near the time of the great national tribute paid to Handel “by a musical commemoration at Westminster Abbey, in which pieces, selected exclusively from his works, were performed by a band of five hundred instruments in the presence of the royal family,” and the principal nobility and gentry of the three kingdoms.”<sup>2</sup> In the first sermon of this series Mr. Newton says: “Conversation in almost every company for some time past has much turned upon the commemoration of Handel, and particularly on his oratorio of the Messiah. I mean to lead your meditations to the language of the oratorio, and to consider, in their order — the several sublime and interesting passages of scripture, which are the bases of that admired composition.”<sup>3</sup> It is easy for a reader to imagine how thoroughly the paragraph at the commencement of the sermon on Mal. iii. 1–3, if preached on the Sabbath after the words of this text had been sung at the Oratorio, must have thrilled the auditors. The occasion was eloquence. — When a church in Scotland was expelled from its time honored sanctuary, and driven to

<sup>1</sup> Memoir of Nathanael Emmons, D.D., pp. 329, 330.

<sup>2</sup> Gorton’s Biographical Dictionary, Art. Handel.

<sup>3</sup> Cecil’s Memoirs of Rev. John Newton, pp. 148, 149.

hold its Sabbath worship in the open air, the pastor preached a melting discourse from Heb. xiii. 13: "Let us go forth, therefore, unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." The scene itself was an exposition and a peroration for the sermon.

VII. Those passages of the Bible which excite an expectation of excellence in the discussion of them may, or may not, be fitted for texts.

1. It is not a wise rule that a minister should always abstain from discoursing on those verses which give promise that his sermons will be interesting. He should aim to illustrate the whole Bible, and therefore to discuss the texts which promise more, as well as those which promise less. He may add variety to his ministrations by speaking on the more splendid, as well as on the more homely, verses of scripture. There are texts which on ordinary occasions promise more than the preacher will fulfil, but which on extraordinary occasions meet the exact wants of the preacher.<sup>1</sup> We sometimes criticise him by saying that he had a good text; but at other times he needs little more; the occasion is itself a discourse; the text and the occasion form as impressive a sermon as the hearers will attend to. There are some themes, also, which can be precisely fitted by only such texts as awaken an expectation of impressive remarks. Wise men have said that a young preacher ought never to discourse on such a topic as the day of judgment. They would have been more wise, if they had said that a young

<sup>1</sup> Robert Hall sometimes discoursed on texts which few men could discuss without painfully disappointing their auditors. A prisoner was executed at Cambridge for uttering forged paper on the Bank of England. Attempting to pass a five-pound note, and observing that he was suspected by the shopkeeper, who was on the point of taking it, he abruptly seized the note and swallowed it. After the execution, Mr. Hall gave notice that he would speak in reference to the sad event from Job xx. 12-16. "Though wickedness be sweet in his mouth, though he hide it under his tongue, though he spare it, and forsake it not, but keep it still within his mouth; yet his meat in his bowels is turned, it is the gall of asps within him. He hath swallowed down riches, and he shall vomit them up again; God shall cast them out of his belly. He shall suck the poison of asps: the viper's tongue shall slay him."

preacher ought never to write a sermon on such a theme without spending on it weeks of prayer and study.

2. But, although a minister may discourse on a passage which gives promise of excellence in his sermon, he should guard against the perils which attend the use of such a text. He is in danger of disappointing his auditors.<sup>1</sup> They may apply to his sermon the words of Sir Fowell Buxton: "Bible and water." There may be a wide difference between a sermon which *ends* with poetical citations from the prophets and a sermon which *begins* with them. At the conclusion of the sermon, they may prevent its being remembered as prosaic and bald; at the introduction, they may cause it to appear more prosaic and bald than it really is. If a preacher aim to outshine the brilliancy, or out-thunder the power, of his text, he will be unnatural. By his fondness for the sublime or rapturous verses of the inspired poets, and by an attempt to imitate, if not equal them, he may cultivate an inflated style.

A minister is in peril of defeating his own end, when he announces a text which gives a special promise of interest. This, for example, is the fact when he raises the expectation that he will make a vehement appeal to the feelings of his auditors. The hearers prepare themselves for the onset, and guard themselves against it. "Forewarned, forearmed." In the most effective expostulation there is an element of surprise. The hymns to be sung before a hortatory sermon should not be themselves in the hortatory vein. If a preacher read in the morning lesson the most glowing scriptures on the happiness of heaven, and if he select for his introductory hymns the most seraphic stanzas on that theme, and then preach a discourse upon it, there is danger that his hearers will be weary, if not ashamed, of him.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> One of the most eminent of American divines was in the habit of selecting very simple texts for his most trenchant discourses, and he once remarked: "I should never dare to preach on Psalm xlvi. 10: 'Be still and know that I am God,' for I could not write a sermon which would correspond with the expectations awakened in the hearers by so sublime a passage."

<sup>2</sup> "In the church men continue to be *men*; and what rouses their spiritual life sooner and more directly, than that which is suggested to them in some unexpected way?" — *Alt's Andeutungen*, etc.; § 21.

3. The more promising his text, so much the more certain should the minister be of his ability to sustain himself in his remarks upon it. He should have reason for trusting, if it be a difficult one, that he can make it plain; if it be a peculiarly beautiful one, that he will not soil it by slovenly words. Jeremy Taylor, with his pen like the laurel, ever green and ever varying, may be safe in discoursing on the words: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Hab. iii. 17, 18). When an ordinary minister would discourse on the same theme he would be safer in taking for his text such words as "Rejoice evermore" (2 Thess. v. 16). A passage which is excessively hackneyed, and also one which is peculiarly sublime, may be discoursed upon with the least peril by the man who is the most richly endowed.

4. When a text raises high expectations that the speaker will be interesting, it is well for him to allay, but not rudely to balk them. By a modest exordium he may convince his hearers at once that he does not aim to swell himself into an equality with the inspired words which he has read. By stating the principles which lie at the basis, or the truths which are hidden in the folds of the poetic imagery in his text, he may at last awaken the emotions and enkindle the resolutions for which that imagery was designed. The rule that a sermon should breathe the spirit of the words which introduce it, does not require that the whole tenor of it should be exactly like the tenor of those words. Sometimes the rule is satisfied if the body of the discourse prepare the way for the final influence of those words, and the permanent impression of it be the exact impression which they are fitted to leave. The full resemblance of the grafted branches to the parent tree may not be seen until they bear their blossoms and their fruit.

VIII. Those verses of the Bible which at once associate

themselves with some interesting truth, and impress themselves on the memory, have a fitness to be used as texts of sermons.

An American minister preached on the words: "That was, and is not, and yet is" (Rev. xvii. 8). Such words do not at once associate themselves with any moral truth. There are other texts which convey an important idea, but not in such a style that they will awaken the special interest of the audience. There are others which excite brilliant expectations in regard to the sermons, but hide the truth behind the person of the preacher. There are still others which may be strictly appropriate to the subject of the discourse, but fail to impress it, or themselves, on the memory. In order to secure a facility and permanence of moral impression various rules have been given, which although excellent in some respects, may yet sometimes gain *one* good quality at the expense of a *better* one.

1. Texts which are plain in themselves have some advantages for making an immediate and abiding impression. They free the speaker from the temptation to display his philological lore; from the necessity of delaying the moral lesson of his sermons. They give him time for practical appeals, and for such a repetition of his text as stamps it indelibly on the mind and heart.

A. Sometimes, however, a verse which is at first obscure arouses a peculiar interest in it. Its very obscurity fascinates one class of hearers. Dr. George Campbell discountenances the use of such a text as Isa. xxi. 11, 12: "He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? watchman, what of the night? The watchman said: The morning cometh, and also the night; if ye will inquire, inquire ye; return, come"; "on which," adds Dr. Campbell, "I once heard a sermon."<sup>1</sup> This passage is indeed enigmatical and its meaning uncertain; it is often repeated, however, in prayers and songs; in its very style it is fitted to awaken a sleeper; it may be accommodated to various uses, may suggest in a

<sup>1</sup> Lectures on Systematic Theology and Pulpit Eloquence, p. 410.

poetical and dramatic way some truths which will remain associated with it in the memory. A preacher may do good by stating all that he knows, even if he know but little, about a verse which is often repeated. He should not choose a text which intimates no moral lesson, but he may choose one which needs to be explained before it becomes instructive.

B. Sometimes a text which is at first obscure, awakens an interest in the Bible as a whole, and impresses the general system of truth on the memory. There are some hearers who desire to make progress in biblical knowledge. Shall not they, as well as the uninquisitive, have their portion in due season? Their attention to the whole system of truth is aroused by an obscure scripture; they are stimulated by a difficulty. While unravelling before them an intricate texture, a man may not only satisfy their inquisitive spirit, but may also wake up the curiosity of more torpid hearers. He may make thinking, out of sleeping men. Shall our hearers never learn the meaning of those words which "are hard to be understood"? If not, then 'the unlearned and unstable will wrest these words to their own destruction.' A part of the Bible will be useless to some persons, unless their pastor explain it at length. He confers a signal benefit on them by inciting them to "search the scriptures daily," and inquire "whether those things were so" which they had heard. He elevates his own standard by striving to elevate the standard of his parishioners, and inducing them "to grow in grace and in knowledge." Not seldom are they exposed to hurtful errors by their superficial views of the Apocalypse, of certain prophecies in the Old Testament, of proverbial and conversational phrases in the New.<sup>1</sup> No one, perhaps, would object to discourses on texts like the following; yet they

<sup>1</sup> Among the passages which Von Ammon (*Handbuch*, etc. §§ 26, 39) regards as unsuitable for texts of sermons are the 22d chapter of Genesis, the 15th chapter of 1 Samuel, the Book of Canticles, the Apocalypse, also Job xix. 25-27 as referring to the resurrection of the dead. Infidels have derived from such passages objections against the inspiration or the utility of the Bible. Shall such objections be unanswered? Von Ammon disapproves also of Matt. xxvii. 46, 51; Ps. lxxviii. 31; Gal. iii. 20; iv. 24 as texts, on account of their obscurity.

often seem obscure, and occasion mysticism, fanaticism, or scepticism: "I come quickly," "This generation shall not pass away until all these things be fulfilled," "Ye ought also to wash one another's feet," "This is my body," "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you," "Swear not at all." "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." In the general, what men learn by hard work, will be fastened in their memory. To a layman as well as a clergyman is the maxim applicable: "*Te totum applica ad textum; rem totam applica ad te.*" True, we may become pedantic in our expositions of dark scriptures; so we may become indolent in avoiding them. We may reflect new honor on the Bible by developing its hidden treasures. The truths of astronomy are now more clearly understood by boys in our schools than they were understood a century ago by many graduates of our colleges. By a wise management of the pulpit there may be an analogous advance in the popular acquaintance with the word of God. Illumine what is dark: Draw fresh lessons of duty from what has been supposed to be antiquated in the Bible, — these are principles as important for the choice of texts as the more agreeable prescription: Let the texts be plain.

2. Texts which are brief, have some advantages for making a facile and permanent impression. If the verse be plain as well as brief, it enters the mind at once, takes full possession of the memory, and sometimes becomes a compressed memento of the entire discourse. The scholar who wrote over his study-door the laconic lesson: "Doce, Disce, aut Discede," made short work with his visitors. Canon Melvill's habit of repeating his text at the close of the more important paragraphs in his sermon, depended on his habit of taking short as well as perspicuous verses for his theme. In fifty-five of his published discourses, forty-two have brief texts. Some preachers when they do not find a Biblical passage which is at the same time short, complete, and appropriate to their theme, insulate a particular clause of their text and repeat

that clause at the conclusion of their emphatic paragraphs. Thus, when they preach on the vice of Detraction, and preface their sermon with the first two verses of the third chapter of Titus, they abbreviate their text by detaching and reiterating the phrase "Speak evil of no man," as if this were the substance of those two verses.<sup>1</sup>

There are lengthened passages, however, which need to be explained and enforced. They exhibit the order in which inspiration has arranged varying truths. An idea acquires a new force from its relation to other ideas. There are extended paragraphs of which a minister can no more give an adequate view by discoursing on each of its isolated verses, than an artist can give an adequate view of the Transfiguration by exhibiting each figure alone and apart. The architecture of a cathedral cannot be learned by examining its stones when separated from each other. If all lengthened texts be neglected for the sake of having a compendious motto for the sermon, the pulpit will lose solidity. It becomes monotonous when it uniformly devotes itself to brief sayings. A loss of dignity is sometimes conjoined with a loss of variety. There were circumstances which rendered it proper for Dr. Raffles of Liverpool, to preach a sermon on the single word, "Forward," and for William Jay of Bath, to preach on the word "Ebenezer."<sup>2</sup> There was, however, a puerility in the feats of clergymen, who still did not intend to trifle with the sacred volume, when they discoursed, one on the phrase "O wheel," one on the word "Mighty," one on the word "But," one on the uninspired word "Selah," another on "Aha;" still another, when he delivered three or four sermons on the word "Amen;" and another yet, when he delivered eleven long discourses on the interjection "O."

<sup>1</sup> See for an abbreviated text, ix. 4 below.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Jay selected this text for a discourse at the Jubilee of the London Missionary Society, in Surrey Chapel, where he had preached on a somewhat similar occasion fifty-six years before. There was a peculiar significance in his repeating, at the age of seventy-six years, before his fellow-laborers in the ministry, a word which drew from them the response: "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us" (1 Sam. vii. 12).

3. Biblical passages which, as *texts*, are fresh and novel have some advantages for making an easy and lasting impression. When a verse is often repeated as the theme of a discourse, it becomes so familiar as to lose its meaning. It is like a globule of quicksilver rolling over a plate of glass. So many sermons have been delivered on it that, as soon as it is repeated, it invites a comparison of the different sermons with each other. Three clergymen have been known to preach three discourses from the same text to the same congregation on three successive Sabbaths. Two clergymen have preached two sermons from the same text to the same congregation on the same Sabbath. The text was a very common, as well as a very plain one; its very phraseology suggested the fit plan of treating it; and so, in fact, all these sermons had substantially the same order of thought. Coincidences like these have exposed ministers to the charge of plagiarism. — Still, the search for novel texts is attended with peril.

A. It often ends in sacrificing the welfare of the hearers to the ingenuity of the preacher. Theological candidates in Germany were once accustomed to choose for their trial-sermons such texts as 2 Sam. x. 5; Mark ix. 49; 2 Tim. iv. 13.<sup>1</sup> A theological candidate in England, who has been imitated by at least one candidate in America, when called to preach a sermon before the clergymen who were to decide upon his fitness for the ministry, discoursed on the words: "Ye are spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come" (Gen. xlii. 9).

B. The fondness for novel texts leads the preacher to discourse on words suggesting ludicrous or repulsive associations. "Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died" (Ezek. xi. 13), was the passage selected for a forenoon's discourse containing some assertions repugnant to the views of a clerical hearer, who replied to them, in the afternoon's discourse of the same day, from the words: "Pekahiah the son of Menahem began to reign" (2 Kings xv. 23). John Foster commenced one

<sup>1</sup> Von Ammon's Handbuch, § 38.

of his sermons with the remark: "Now, I dare say, some of you may think that I am going to preach a very odd sermon from such an odd text." "A minister of no ordinary celebrity once preached from 1 Kings x. 22: 'Gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks.'" <sup>1</sup> Several Puritan divines have delivered analogical discourses on Psa. lx. 8. Massillon has been imitated by more than one clergyman, selecting the text: "Loose him [the colt] and bring him hither" (Luke xix. 30), for a sermon on the duty of fasting for sin, and thus reducing the animal appetites. The preacher defends such a sermon by pleading that it arouses men from their listlessness. But it often awakes them from sleep only to encourage them in levity. "In the choice of the text care is to be taken not to choose texts that seem to have humor in them." <sup>2</sup>— German writers on homiletics proscribe, as the bases of sermons, several verses in the Old Testament, — in the book of Judges and the Canticles, for instance, — because they are associated with repulsive ideas. Vinet goes so far as to proscribe 2 Peter ii. 12. There is, however, at the present day, little danger of erring in this direction.

IX. A passage of the Bible has one fitness to be used as a text, when it introduces an attractive variety into the methods of presenting religious truth.

1. Its phraseology may lead the mind into a distinctive and peculiar train of thought. It may not be novel as a text, yet the style of it may suggest a novel course of remark. A new emphasis may be laid upon a very common word, and give a peculiar freshness to an entire discourse. When Dr. Steinkopf was taking breakfast at the house of Henry Venn Elliott, a member of the host's family remarked that they had begun their meal without saying grace. The guest arose at once, and prayed: "Lord, pardon thy servants, who can begin to enjoy any of thy mercies without first thanking thee. Bless the Lord, O our souls, and *forget not*

<sup>1</sup> Lectures on Preaching. By S. T. Sturtevant (3d ed.), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bishop Burnet, on the Pastoral Care, chap. viii.

all his benefits.”<sup>1</sup> This use of Ps. ciii. 2 was as novel as if the verse itself had been an unfamiliar one.

The textual sermon has been compared to a tree springing up from the seed. The text, like the seed, germinates according to its own laws; has an organic relation to the discourse evolved from it, the sap of the text reaching “the furthest twig of the sermon”; the variety of the texts developing a like variety in the homilies which are started and fostered by them. ‘All the varying influences of experience, observation, reading, and reflection, should minister to the sermon growing up from the text, as the influences of the air, dew, rain, and sunshine, minister to the tree, growing up from the seed.’<sup>2</sup>

It is well said by a class of critics, that for a discourse proving the duty of prayer to God, the text 1 Tim. ii. 2 is more appropriate than Acts viii. 15; because the former passage contains an apostolic exhortation to pray, the latter passage contains only a record of an apostolic example; for a sermon on the sinfulness of misusing the tongue the first clause of Lev. xix. 16 is more pertinent than 1 John iii. 18, because the former passage is a direct command of Jehovah, relating to nothing but wrong speech, the latter passage is an apostolic exhortation relating to wrong speech and other topics as well; for a sermon proving the duty of living a holy life, the text 1 Pet. i. 16, 17 is more suitable than Isa. vi. 3, because the former passage contains both a divine and an apostolic injunction, the latter contains only an exclamation of the seraphim.<sup>3</sup> These criticisms are important; but they overlook the fact that when a pastor needs to add a refreshing variety to his discourses, he may describe a practice of men with prominent reference at one time to its distinctive character, at another time to its connection with other practices; now to its inherent goodness or badness, and then to its good or bad results; here to the law of God,

<sup>1</sup> The Life of the Rev. Henry Venn Elliott, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> See Dr. Kidder's Christian Pastorate, pp. 351, 352.

<sup>3</sup> D. Siegm. Jacob Baumgarten's Anweisung zum erbaulichen Predigen, § 9.

there to the opinions of society. The use of texts may contribute to the unity of single discourses, also to the variety of a series. The text is called the rudder of the sermon, and as various passages of the Bible have indefinitely various forms they may diversify the course of the sermons indefinitely.

2. A text may consist of parallel, or of mutually illustrative scriptures, and thus variegate the services of the church. So far from confining himself to a single verse, or even a single chapter, of the Bible, a pastor may discourse on an entire book, as for example, the book of Job, Ecclesiastes, etc. He may discourse, not always on a text as associated with its context, but sometimes on parallel verses culled from different parts of the Old and New Testaments, on narratives, for example, in the Old Testament describing the type, conjoined with narratives in the New Testament describing the antitype. More than one interesting sermon has been written on Lev. xvi. 2-19 united with Heb. vii. 25-28; the former describing the entrance of the Jewish high priest into the holiest part of the temple, and the latter alluding to the entrance of the Redeemer into the immediate presence of him who occupieth the mercy-seat: also on Num. xxi. 7-9, conjoined with John iii. 14, 15; the former detailing the circumstances of raising the brazen serpent in the wilderness, and the latter pointing to him who was lifted up for our spiritual healing: also on Gen. xxii. 1-14 connected with John iii. 16; the former giving a history of Abraham preparing to offer his only son, and the latter teaching the grace of the Father who did offer his only begotten.

3. For the sake of variety, a text may consist of scriptures apparently inconsistent one with another.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes a deeper interest is awakened by examining two or more

<sup>1</sup> John Newton would not have endorsed this remark. "I shall preach," he says, "perhaps very usefully upon two opposite texts, while kept apart; but, if I attempt nicely to reconcile them, it is ten to one if I do not begin to bungle."—Cecil's *Memoirs of Newton*, p. 200.

passages which appear to contradict each other, than by examining two or more which resemble each other. Men are eager to learn the meaning and force of a text, one part of which is John xv. 15: "All things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you," and the other part is John xvi. 12: "I have yet many things to say unto you; but ye cannot bear them now." Why did our Lord utter the first part of this text *after* the second part, yet in the same hour with it? The Bible rouses the mind from its torpid state by declaring that man dieth and is not, and yet lives forever; that man is a worm of the dust, and yet is made little lower than the angels; that he must love, and yet hate his father, mother, brother, sister; that every man must bear his own burden, and yet each one bear the burdens of his brethren; that man's body will be raised from the grave, and yet not the same body; that Christ was ignorant of some things, and yet knew all things; that he could not hold up his own cross, and yet upholdeth all things by the word of his power. When two classes of passages stand in apparently hostile array against each other at the opening of a sermon, the somnolent hearer is kept awake in order to see how the conflict will end. He may be raised by the discourse from his natural love of learning the truth to a gracious love of the truth which is learned.<sup>1</sup>

4. In order to relieve the monotony of the pulpit, a text may be chosen for its merely indirect and analogical references. It may excite a new interest, if it suggest a train of thought which the sermon does not distinctly specify. A biblical narrative may be so elucidated that it will intimate truths not noticed explicitly by the minister. Of a Saturday evening,

<sup>1</sup> Valuable hints on the treatment of texts which may vivify and brighten a discourse by the contrasts which they present are given in the various works (named in the note at the end of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. xxx.), on "Biblical Contradictions," especially in the very elaborate volume entitled "The Discrepancies of Scripture. An Examination of Texts which are said to conflict with one another. By John W. Haley, M.A. With an Introduction by Alvah Hovey, D.D., President of Newton Theological Institution, and Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics." 1873.

several young men in the parish of Rev. Dr. Emmons were drowned, and only one member of their party was saved. On Sabbath morning he preached a sermon from the text: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." It was not necessary to make the slightest allusion to the casualty of the preceding day. Seldom has a more intense (even if unwarranted) interest been awakened among a congregation than by the discourse in which the same divine painted the character of Jeroboam, and made his text (2 Kings xvii. 21) loom up as a portrait of Thomas Jefferson.<sup>1</sup> Before a class of men who were beginning to deny the doctrine of future punishment, a severely logical, as well as analogical, discourse was once preached on Gen. xix. 24, 25. The inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrhah were represented as going through a certain process of reasoning to prove that the predicted ruin of their cities could not be allowed under the fatherly care of a kind, merciful, and gracious God. The preacher made no attempt to refute the reasoning, but left it to be overwhelmed by the simple words of his text: "Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrhah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities," etc. With these words the preacher abruptly closed his discourse. "Why did he not apply it?" was the question asked by men who saw that the argument seeming to prove that Sodom would not be destroyed was the very argument seeming to prove that the finally impenitent would not be punished. The hearers felt the pertinence of the sermon to their own speculations. The sermon, however, did not allude to them, but prompted the restless inquiry: "Why did he not apply it?" No proof is so convincing as that which a hearer is led to work out by his own logic.

On a Sabbath evening, near the pyramids of Egypt, after his hearers had spent several days in exploring the sites of Memphis, Heliopolis, and the old villages along the Nile, an English minister culled out for his text a few phrases from

<sup>1</sup> See Duyckink's *Cyclopaedia of American Literature*, Vol. i. p. 247; *Memoir of Emmons*, chap. viii. § 3, pp. 138-142, and chap. xv. § 1, p. 321.

the first eight verses of the sixth chapter of Exodus; and, as these familiar phrases were explained, it seemed as if the Lord were speaking audibly to men oppressed by their sinfulness, just as the same Lord spoke centuries ago on that Egyptian plain to men groaning under their taskmasters; "And God . . . . said . . . . I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob [and saved them], . . . . and I have also established my covenant with them [and their spiritual children], . . . . and I have also heard the groaning of the children [mourning for their sins]; . . . . and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians [the slavery of sin], . . . . and I will redeem you with a stretched-out arm [the arms extended on the cross], . . . . and I will take you to me for a people [a spiritual church], and I will be to you a God [the Almighty Comforter], . . . . and I will bring you into the land [of freedom, of everlasting rest, where all of you shall be kings and priests unto God]." A critic remarked: "In that entire sermon there were not many, if any, ideas which *were* new to me; and also not many which did not *seem* new."

X. Those verses of the Bible which appear to have suddenly suggested themselves to the preacher at the time of his discoursing upon them, are fitted, in at least one particular, to be used as texts.

The sermons of a minister are sometimes regarded as the dried preparations of the botanist. He appears to be artificial, to have searched laboriously for some biblical verse with which he might associate his predetermined train of thought. We read of one German divine preaching on the utility of turnpike roads as free from robbers, and taking for his text the parable of the good Samaritan; of another discoursing on the importance of men's restricting themselves to only one article of food at a meal, and the text for his preachment was: "One thing is needful"; of still another enforcing the duty of walking into the country for exercise, and his text was: "Behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs."

When his hearers *can* not, and also when they *do* not, perceive a natural connection between the minister's text and his other religious services, he is in danger of losing sympathy with his congregation. In order to avoid the appearance of stiffness and isolation, he may discourse on such passages as *seem* to have occurred to him spontaneously, instead of having been searched for wearily. He gains this *appearance* of naturalness when he discourses on a passage which has a marked pertinence to the scenes of the day, or which has the charm of novelty, or which does, in fact, come of itself into his mind at the very hour of his beginning to deliver his sermon. When he refreshes himself with a new thought, he refreshes his hearers likewise. He speaks extempore on a verse which occurs to him extempore, and the fact of such an occurrence has a talismanic power over him and his auditors. Perhaps he has written his discourse, but a new exigency induces him to build a new portico for the old edifice. The unexpected choice of his text stimulates him to fresh effort in delivering what he had antecedently prepared. He moves onward the more vigorously, because he was excited at his starting-place. He was to describe the beneficence of the Messiah, in a sermon from Ps. lxxii. 13: "He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy"; but just before the speaker announced these words, a shower began to fall upon the parched harvest-fields, and he at once changed his text to the sixth verse of the same Psalm: "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, as showers that water the earth." He was expecting to describe the divine omnipotence, in a discourse from Ps. lxii. 11: "Power belongeth unto God"; but a violent thunder-storm arose after the congregation had assembled, and the text was changed to Job xxxvii. 5: "God thundereth marvellously with his voice; great things doeth he which we cannot comprehend." The latter of these two verses suggests the same idea with the former; but it came like lightning into the mind of the preacher, and electrified the audience. In the hottest part of one of the hottest days of a recent summer, a

sermon on the happiness of heaven was preached from Rev. xxi. 25 : " The gates of it shall not be shut at all by day ; for there shall be no night there " ; and the beautiful verses of Doddridge were repeated :

" No midnight shade, no clouded sun,  
But sacred, high, eternal noon."

If the preacher had attained the fitting command over his own powers, and in particular over his memory of the inspired volume, he might have relieved the sultriness of that afternoon by substituting for his text two verses of his context : " And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb, . . . . and on either side of the river was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations " (Rev. xxii. 1, 2). On one day a brilliant light, on another day a cooling stream, is the most expressive symbol of the upper paradise.

It seems to have been a favorite remark of Lord Chesterfield, that in a ' numerous assembly everything depends upon *instantaneous turns.*' There are many exemplifications of this truth in the history of the pulpit. A New England parish was once distracted by a quarrel among the singers ; an eminent divine was privately requested to address the parish on the evils of discord ; before he began his sermon the two choristers had led the two factions of the choir in singing for the same hymn two different tunes, and the audience were confounded by this music of Babel ; the preacher thought at once of 1 Cor. xi. 18 : " For first of all when ye come together in the church, I *hear* that there be divisions among you, and I *partly* believe it " ; the sudden choice of this text, the pertinence of it, the seeming delicacy of it, put the speaker and the hearers into the right humor, and brought the choir, as well as the parish, into harmony. Another divine was called to preach a sermon on a week-day at a time of special religious interest. The men of Belial in his parish had formed a secret plan to interrupt the religious

service by a barbecue; and as soon as the service had begun they paraded their roasted ox before the church edifice. When the minister understood the meaning of the noise and the march, his mind darted upon Ps. lxi. 30, 31: "I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving. This also shall please the Lord better than an ox or bullock that hath horns and hoofs." Such a readiness in the choice of a text gives to a minister a factitious as well as a real power, and keeps his hearers on the alert, expecting some quick or ingenious turn. The *apparent* extemporization does not always lose its power if it be the *actual* result of premeditation.

Here, however, as elsewhere, an excellence readily slides into a fault. Here, as elsewhere, we may easily overstep the line between propriety and impropriety, and if we remain a rod from this line on the right side of it, we are wiser than if we go an inch beyond it on the wrong side. Sound sense, a cultivated taste, and simple piety will recognize the exact line. When a pastor regards himself as divinely called to speak on a verse merely because it has suddenly occurred to him, or because it chances to tally with some minor event of the day, he is in peril of degrading his office. One minister has been known to stand in the pulpit as a schoolmaster at his desk, and adapt a text to some individual whom he espies in a pew, as a pedagogue directs a reproof to some idle boy at the bench. "What meaneth, then, this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" (1 Sam. xv. 14) was a text chosen by a clergyman after having been disturbed, and expecting to be again disturbed, by the members of his congregation noisily leaving the sanctuary. "Should such a man as I flee?" was the remark made by a minister, who saw that when he rose to preach several men in the assembly rose to escape from him. The remark detained the fugitives until they perceived that it was the text (Neh. vi. 11) of the sermon which they were determined not to hear. Several rhetoricians, Von Ammon for example, have condemned Archdeacon Paley for selecting

a text which pointed at the diminutive stature, the immature age, the official power of one of his hearers; the ambition, avarice, selfishness of others.<sup>1</sup> The younger Pitt had solicited the votes of the University of Cambridge for a seat in Parliament, and been repulsed. A few months afterward he obtained the desired votes, and very soon became Prime Minister of England. After his elevation the Premier, only twenty-five years of age, visited his Alma Mater, and was received with such a degree of adulation as betrayed the desire of the gowmsmen for places of honor and profit. The common report has been that, at his first appearance in St. Mary's church, he was obliged to hear from Dr. Paley a discourse to sycophants from John vi. 9: "There is a lad here which hath five barley loaves and two small fishes, but what are they among so many?" When asked whether he did come down to this personality the Archdeacon said: No. "I was not at Cambridge at the time; but I remember that, one day when I was riding out with a friend in the neighborhood of Carlisle, and we were talking about the bustle and confusion which Mr. Pitt's appearance would then cause in the University, I said that if I had been there, and asked to preach on the occasion, I would have taken that passage for my text."<sup>2</sup> It is easier to say what one would do than to do it. A verse may be *naturally* suggested, and yet be, on the whole, improper for a text.

### § 6. *Methods of Announcing the Text.*

In many churches the text is announced in a peculiarly formal, dignified, and solemn manner. It is prefaced with an Introduction, sometimes as long as the Introduction of the sermon, is occasionally preceded or followed by a short prayer, and, when it is recited, the congregation reverently

<sup>1</sup> Handbuch der Anleitung zur Kanzelberedsamkeit von Dr. Christoph. Friedrich von Ammon. § 38. Von Ammon does not name Dr. Paley as the object of his criticism, but alludes to the preacher as "one of the most learned theologians of the University." He derives his narrative from Hüttner's Eng-lisch. Miscellen. Band III. St. 1. s. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Paley's Works, Vol. i. pp. 43, 44.

rise. The occasion is not infrequent, when, at least, some parts of this method are eminently proper. They add an emphasis to the discourse. The Introduction to the text calls particular attention to it. Some peculiarity of the biblical verse may demand a few prefatory words. Two or three very interesting sermons, for example, have been preached on the law: "If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way in any tree, or on the ground, whether they be young ones or eggs, and the dam sitting upon the young or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young: But thou shalt in any wise let the dam go, and take the young to thee, that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days" (Deut. xxii. 6, 7). The moral significance of such words is so recondite that they may appear inapposite for the pulpit, unless the minds of the hearers be led insensibly and gradually to perceive that the greatest truths lie hidden in the smallest phenomena. The universal providence of God is revealed in the fall of a sparrow. "A bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter."

The ancient formality in announcing the text is often reduced, in our land and age, to the simple request, that the audience duly consider the truths which are to be presented. Sometimes the minister breaks the silence of the church by abruptly naming the chapter and verse which contain the words on which he is to speak; or still more abruptly by reciting the words before he names the place where they are to be found. Not infrequently he may exhibit the dignity of these words by this isolation of them. When the people are still and expectant he utters the verse on which he is to comment, and which first of all he desires to lodge in the memory of his hearers: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. cxxiv. 8), or "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth" (Ps. cxlv. 18), or "God is a spirit; and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John iv. 24), or "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive

ourselves, and the truth is not in us; if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John i. 8, 9), or "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John ii. 1). The utility of a text and the importance of an impressive elocution were once illustrated by a minister who, with a majestic voice, and without any previous reference to chapter and verse, overawed his hearers by the words: "Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation" (John v. 28, 29). He reiterated these words with such pathos and authority that his sermon was long remembered, yet no part of it except the text could be specified. It was but a string on which the diamond hung. It was rich indeed, but its chief wealth was in the verses which introduced it.

Still, every occasion and every text do not allow this abruptness. A minister must have his thoughts about him. He may seem to be well nigh blasphemous when he rises, and without a single introductory word proclaims: "I am the Lord; I change not" (Mal. iii. 6). He may appear to be indulging in a trivial personality when he calls the attention of the hearers and spectators to "My leanness, my leanness; woe unto me" (Isa. xxiv. 16). An audience in an American city were once convulsed with laughter by a clergyman who was, like Baron Hardenbroke, "of a circumference which looked as if eating, drinking, and sleeping were his sole occupation," and who, before he began his sermon, surprised his people by declaring, without a preface, "If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more" (Phil. iii. 4). The clergyman was ignorant of any reason for the levity of his hearers; his innocence made him guileless; but he learned from the incident that when a minister discourses on a text which will be associated with his own physique, or any marked

event of his life, he should not omit the precautionary formula.

When a preacher delivers an address in behalf of some missionary society or charitable institution, some needy college or church, he may deliver it in the form of a Statement, rather than that of a Sermon. He may, now and then, introduce a novelty into the hour of divine service by founding his remarks on the facts of present history, instead of founding them on a passage of the Bible. If, however, he preface his remarks by a biblical epigraph, he should never treat that epigraph as a mere motto (because texts of sermons are distinguished from mottos for essays), but he should introduce it, and make subsequent allusions to it, as an expression of principles involved in his eleemosynary plea. Then, it is often graceful for him to preface his text by some explanatory or apologetic remarks, in order that his hearers may not be startled by the violence of the transition from his comment on inspired words to his statement of pecuniary needs. Beginning his discourse with 1 Sam. xiv. 6: "It may be that the Lord will work for us; for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few," an unskilful pleader first describes the thrilling scene which occurred in the valley between Michmash and Gibeah, and secondly, plunges his hearers into a "Statement of the wants of the Tract and Book Society," or the "Society for the relief of Discharged Convicts." A more expert orator saves his audience from a shock, by saying, at the outset, that he does not intend to preach a regular sermon on any doctrine or any general duty specified in the Bible; but he merely designs to make certain statements in regard to the Tract and Book Society; and these statements will illustrate and be illustrated by the words which Jonathan uttered to his armor-bearer; words breathing the lowly, yet brave spirit, the zeal and the faith, by which we may hope to rise from small beginnings to great results; words which are recorded in 1 Sam. xiv. 6, and which will often suggest themselves to the hearer by the facts narrated in the address.

If a preacher aim to introduce his text in easy and natural methods, consonant with its peculiar spirit, and with the occasion on which he speaks, he will be apt to free his other services from monotony. One source of the interest which Professor Lawson excited was the appropriate variety of the modes in which he began his discourses. He did not allow his pulpit to resemble

“A sleepy land, where, under the same wheel,  
The same old rut would deepen year by year.”

We read that on one occasion, a clergyman, who had finished his discourse, and had forgotten that Dr. Lawson was to deliver another immediately afterward, pronounced the benediction, and thus dismissed the assembly. But the ever-ready preacher rose at once, and began his sermon, with the words: “My friends, you will, no doubt, think it strange that the apostolic benediction has been pronounced before the close of the services; but in the sixteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, and twentieth verse, you will find that Paul pronounces the blessing, and, after adding some important truths, he pronounces it a second time, verse twenty-fourth.” Once he was expecting to preach the second sermon, immediately after one of his persevering brethren had finished the first sermon, on an important occasion; but his tenacious brother hung upon the first discourse so long as to leave no time for the second. Dr. Lawson rose, repeated the inspired words: “For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood, brass, and for stones, iron,” and then announced that he should omit his own wooden discourse, and read what is much more precious,—a golden chapter of the Bible. Having recited it, he dismissed the assembly. His manner of introducing the chapter made the chapter itself a sermon. A novelty is often an emphasis. Still, we must remember the legal maxim: “Privilegium non transit in exemplum.”