

THE PULPIT

OF THE

ASSOCIATE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH.

CONSISTING OF

SERMONS BY THE MINISTERS

OF THE

FOUR SYNODS OF THAT DENOMINATION.

EDITED BY

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CINCINNATI:

PRINTED BY J. A. & U. P. JAMES,
WALNUT STREET, ABOVE FOURTH.

1851.

SERMON VII.

FISHERS OF MEN.

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“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew iv. 19.

The persons thus addressed—“Simon, called Peter, and Andrew his brother,”—had been followers of our Lord for some time previous to the occurrence here narrated, as appears from John i. 37. But they had not yet abandoned their old employment. Our Lord was just entering 'on, or perhaps had just begun his public ministry. He had been baptized by his Forerunner—he had received the Special unction of the Holy Ghost—he had endured, during his forty days sojourn in the desert, the fierce assaults of the devil—he was now ready, for a public and formal entrance upon the work given him to do as the Son of Man. “From *that time* Jesus began to preach and to say—repent,” &c.

In one aspect of that great enterprise which brought him to our world Jesus appears as the sole agent; when he laid the foundations of the kingdom of grace in his own precious blood and righteousness, “of the people there was none with him.” “He trod the wine press alone.” But in the work of publishing his Gospel to the world, and thus of bringing men to the enjoyment of its blessings, he condescends to employ subordinate agencies. Accordingly, he selects, at the very outset of his own personal ministry on earth, his associate her-

asks of the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and after training them for the work, sends them forth upon their sublime errand. How different his choice, from that which carnal reason would have made? The priests, the scribes, the learned occupants of Moses' seat, the admired leaders of the Jewish sects—the men of wealth, of science, of influence, are all passed by; not one of them is selected. The honor is reserved for humble, unlettered, unpolished men. The propagation of that Gospel which is destined to revolutionize the world, is to be carried on in such a way as to show that it owes nothing to human might or power, and therefore "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, and foolish things to confound the wise." The priceless treasure of a world's life and salvation is put into earthen vessels "that the excellency of the power may be seen to be of God." "Follow me," said the divine Teacher to the fishermen of the sea of Gallilee, "and I will make you *fishers of men.*" Obedient to the heavenly call, they at once abandon their nets to follow Jesus, and to be educated by him for the apostleship of a new economy. Let us ponder the meaning of this brief but pregnant sentence.

I. The great end of the Christian ministry is here distinctly declared. All who enter it are called to be "*fishers of men.*"

What was the object of Christ's own mission? "I am come," said he, "that the world through me might have life;—to seek and to save the lost." His errand was to draw men unto God; to translate them out of the kingdom of darkness and guilt, into the kingdom of light and holiness; to redeem them from the wretched and degrading bondage of Satan, and bring them into "the glorious liberty of God's dear children." Such too is the design of the ministry; for in his memorable intercessory prayer, John xvii, he says, "as thou hast sent me into the world, so have I sent them into the world." "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ."

The aim of the fisherman is to catch fish; this is the simple and sole end of his occupation. Whenever he goes forth

to the river or the ocean, it is to gather the living treasures of the deep. He is ever anxious and hoping for success. If he takes nothing, he feels that his time and toil for that day are virtually thrown away, unless perchance he has learned some new lesson of experience. However complete his implements or perfect his skill, his anxieties never terminate on these things; they are simply means to an end; he looks to the result, and he is satisfied only when he can return home with his well filled bag or his deeply laden boat.

Fathers and brethren,* is there not a divine wisdom evinced by our Savior Christ, in his using the primitive occupation of Peter and Andrew, to illustrate the nature of that sublimest of all services in which men can engage—the ministry of reconciliation? Are there not many very distinct and striking points of analogy between the business of the secular, and that of the spiritual fisherman? Time would fail me, if I undertook to notice even in the most cursory way, all the valuable lessons which this analogy suggests. Let me on the present occasion direct your minds to only two of the more obvious ones, viz., to the *singleness of purpose* and the *expectation of success*, by which all who are called to be “fishers of men,” should be distinguished.

How is it with the ordinary fisherman in regard to the first of these points,—singleness of purpose? For reasons which need not be stated, and which apply to all trades and professions, it manifestly will not do for him to connect some other and quite different employment with his own proper business. If he does, the chances are that he will fail in both. And so with the spiritual fisher—his aim must be single, his business one—the exclusive one of watching for souls. He must ever remember that the one grand object of the Christian ministry is to bring apostate men back to God,—to save them from present guilt, from future wrath, to prepare them for the coming glories of the kingdom of heaven. Thus the Master himself acted: “I must preach in other cities also, for therefore I

* This discourse was preached at an ordination, before the Presbytery of New York.

am sent." Such was the guiding principle of the first apostles, who, fearful of the distracting influence of mere secularities, would not consent to serve even the tables of the church, but gave themselves wholly "to prayer and the ministry of the word."

The Christian minister has something else, and something unspeakably higher and holier to do, than to perform the function of a moral policeman—to keep the world in order, by guarding society against those outbreaks of human wickedness, which civil legislators have no power to prevent. He has something else, and something higher to do, than to extend the blessings of education, to promote the interests of literature and science. He holds a far higher position than that of the mere minister of civilization. No doubt the secular welfare of society in all its manifold forms is immensely, though indirectly, advanced by the labors of a faithful ministry. The things just mentioned are within certain limits worthy of a minister's regard, for their own sake, as well as for their bearing upon men's highest interests; still, when he asks himself the question, What is my business? his answer must be, to save souls,—to watch for souls as one who must give account.

And here let me ask, if there is not ground for fear, that the reason why our ministry is not more productive in the way of the conversion of sinners, is the want of this very singleness of aim? Where a deep and vivid impression exists, that the end of the ministry is to save lost men, its powerful and formative influence will develop itself in all the parts of pastoral life.

Look at the effect of this conviction, for example, upon the minister in his study. In the first place, it will force him to become a student,—“to give himself to reading;” it will impel him to engage in studies of the right sort; it will put a wholesome restraint upon his reading; it will prompt him to gather materials for the use of the sanctuary, in all the walks of human learning; it will impart a holy tone to his researches, his meditations, and his writings. Believe me, it is quite

impossible that he can be a vain trifler during the week, or can idly dawdle over newspapers, or can gad about to pick up and retail news, and when the Sabbath comes, draw on his old stock of sermons, or take a text, and preach from it at random, who is perpetually hearing the voice of Christ saying to him, "I have made thee a fisher of men." He on whose heart that word of Christ is written, must be a daily, painstaking, prayerful student of the Scriptures; he will aim to make the books he reads, and the events of the day, tell upon the grand purpose of his life; in a word, he will labor with all his might to perfect himself in the divine, the blessed art of winning souls to Christ.

Or look at the influence of this conviction upon the minister in the pulpit. Would it suffer him to enter that sacred place with empty declamation, to fill the house of God with the fragrance of the flowers of rhetoric, or to gain the applause of his hearers by the display of his logic, or his learning, or his eloquence? No, indeed. As with the prophets of old, so with him,—“the burden of the Lord” would be too heavy upon his soul to admit of such a thought. Like these holy messengers of former days, he would always go to his pulpit as a “man of God,” and a man *for* God. And his heart would be filled with inexpressible anguish if he found that the only or the chief result of his sermons was to fix his people’s admiration upon himself. Nor is this all. Not only upon his ministrations in general, but on each of them in detail does this conviction operate. The arrows in his quiver are too precious to be shot at men of straw, or to be sent aimless into the air. Each sermon and address will have a point. Whether he expounds doctrine, or enforces precepts, his preaching will be made to bear, in some way, on the salvation of his hearers, by arousing the careless, subduing the rebellious, comforting the mourners, or stimulating the saint to fresh activity in the life of faith, love and hope.

The second point of analogy is—*expectation of success*. In every department of human enterprise the expectation of success is closely connected with the actual attainment. When Alexander the Great was preparing to set out on his career of

conquest, he distributed among his friends his possessions with such a princely liberality that one of them with some anxiety asked, what he meant to reserve for himself. "Hope," replied the young warrior.—How is it with the ordinary fisherman? Is it not the hope of an abundant reward that animates him while making the needful preparation that often sends him far out upon the bosom of the deep, and by its buoyant energy sustains him during the fierce tempest and the dreary night. Confidence of success—baseless as it often proves to be—is nevertheless one of the chief springs of human activity; and therefore if you take away all hope, you put an end to all exertion.

I need not dwell on the grounds of hope which belong to the faithful minister of Christ. They are most ample. In the very call of his divine Master there is an implied promise and pledge of abundant success. He has, besides, the express assurances of his God;—"My word *shall not return unto me void.*"—"He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, *shall doubtless* return again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."—Ps. cxxvi. 6.

Now if there be such an analogy between the functions of the minister and those of the fisherman, as the text asserts, then, the former is warranted to go to his pulpit, always, with the cheering persuasion that his "labor shall not be in vain in the Lord." He not only *may* do this, but he ought to do it; with this sustaining and invigorating hope he should sit down to prepare each sermon, and enter each Sabbath on his public work—that his message shall in some way and measure reach the end for which the ministry has been instituted. He comes to his people in Christ's name; he brings his message, he expounds His word, he dispenses His mysteries; and with the design for which he does all this—the salvation of sinners and the growing holiness of saints—the glory of the Redeemer is identified. True, the preacher's voice is powerless; his reasoning, his eloquence, his tenderest appeals, in themselves, will have no more effect than water cast upon a rock. But this so far from disheartening, is calculated to produce the

opposite result; for in proportion as he feels his own nothingness, he will be forced to throw himself the more unreservedly and confidently on the promise of the Savior to make his own word "spirit and life."

In every age of the church, this seems to have been a marked feature in the character of those who were eminent for their usefulness, viz., a profound consciousness that they were God's ministers, and as such the heralds of a life-giving Gospel. Confident that their message was divine, they were no less confident that it would be "mighty through God." They expected fruit when they went to the pulpit; they searched for fruit after they came out of it; they put it upon the elders of the church, each in his several quarter, to be on the constant outlook for the fruit of the word preached. In the First and Second Books of Discipline of our mother Church of Scotland, this is laid down as one of the chief duties of the eldership—to be on the watch for the upspringing of the good seed sown from Sabbath to Sabbath. And O! how rich the harvests that were gathered in these days of old! Let us search and see if the comparative barrenness of our ministry be not owing to the want of a right faith and hope in the mightiness of his word, in whose name we preach—of "that great Lord whose voice is upon many waters," full of majesty, power, and life.

We must indeed never forget the relation of divine sovereignty to ministerial success.* "The times and seasons the Father hath reserved in his own power." We must not infer that we "have labored in vain," because we do not see immediate fruit, or because the result is different from what we had expected. The germinating process of the seed sown beneath the soil is going on, though the sower cannot see it; and so the good

* "When thou writest a sermon, or dost ruminat on it, then say to God—Lord, this will be altogether weak without thy power accompanying it; cry incessantly that the Lord may drive the fish into the net when thou art spreading it."—*Boston's Art of Man-Fishing*. This soliloquy is one of the very best things that Boston ever wrote; a wonderful production for a Probationer, which he was when it was written. We would urge the careful perusal of it, upon all ministers.

word of God is often working in the hearer's heart, in a way and manner accordant with that description of it "as a still small voice." Many a faithful pastor has found that he has accomplished much at the very time when he thought he had done nothing. Hervey had a small parish, and his preaching seems to have had little fruit, yet by his pen he was the minister of good to thousands; and who can doubt that God kept him in Weston Favel as the position where he could most effectually edify the body of Christ. So with Boston, and many others. Some have one gift, some another. The great thing is to ask, with Paul, "Lord what wilt thou have me to do;" and having got the answer, to be "diligent in business, serving the Lord," trusting him for the measure and manner of success, yet "abounding in hope," that we shall not spend our strength for nought in the service of the Lord.

II. *The way to secure the great end of the ministry is pointed out.*—"Follow me."

I need not stop to prove the position that the true theologian, and the accomplished pastor, are eminently the workmanship of the Lord Jesus. He alone knows the nature of the work to be done, and he alone can make the proper instruments to do it.—"I will make you fishers." But this exercise of Christ's power and grace is connected with *their following him*. When our Lord said to Peter and Andrew, "follow me," he called them to become his personal attendants, to dwell in his society, to listen to his teachings, to go with him on his journeys, and thus while learning the mysteries of the kingdom, by the daily contemplation of the perfect example of their Master, to be transformed into the same image. Looking then to the historical connections of these words, we may infer that following Christ in order to become "fishers of men" implies,

1. The diligent study of the whole word of God, so as to *learn the mind of Christ*.

We must search the Scriptures, not only to gather from them the elements of our theology, but also that we may learn the best methods of bringing divine truth to bear upon

the consciences and the hearts of men. "The sword of the Spirit"—such is one of the symbols of the word—denoting its power to penetrate the inmost recesses of the soul. Again, "is not my word as a fire and a hammer;" this is another symbol indicating its resistless might, its purifying, formative influence. It reproves, corrects, instructs, and makes the man of God perfect.

Now experience shows that these results are best secured by the preacher, who instead of discussing the common-places of theology, or isolated texts, chiefly deals in continuous exposition of the word of life; or, to use the good old word, by lecturing. True, indeed, this may be done with the dryness of the critic who handles only terms and phrases; it may want the warmth and the holy unction that come from a loving heart, and thus make the ears of the people dull that they cannot hear. The exposition I mean, is such as has life and heart, which, while opening up the Scriptures, ever aims to rouse the conscience and move the soul. This is the style of preaching which is best fitted to produce the perfect man in Christ Jesus,—to generate a robust Christianity adorned with all the gentler graces of the Gospel, and is not tossed about with every wind of doctrine. In the days of the Reformers, and of the Nonconformists, when the word of the Lord had such free course, this style of preaching, as their works evince, was greatly in vogue. The word of Christ dwelt in them richly; and in the pulpit they expounded it abundantly. As their biographers often say of them, they were painful students of the Bible; and one of the happy effects of expository preaching, when rightly conducted, is that it compels the minister to study the whole word of God,—the course of events in its histories, the trains of reasoning in the Epistles, the varied phases of experience in the Psalms; and the magnificent visions of the future revealed by Prophecy.

Brethren! let us put a higher value on the word of Christ, and a higher honor on the very form in which the divine Teacher has been pleased to give us his eternal truth; let it be our aim to "speak not in the words which man's wisdom

teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth." Our church has always highly esteemed, and almost demanded this kind of preaching; and yet, as with so many other things to which we have long been accustomed, there is room to doubt whether ministers or people are duly sensible of its worth as a means of growth in grace. Let us take pains to find out the mind of Christ as declared in his word, and let us labor to bring the souls of our hearers not merely into mechanical contact—shall I say—but living communion with the doctrine of Christ. But it is not enough to ascertain the will of Christ, though alas! many, who in theory are orthodox enough, act as if bare knowledge is everything, and will contend about the size and the shape of some "pin of the tabernacle" as zealously as if it were *per se* as important as the tabernacle itself. There must be,

2. *The diligent copying of Christ's example;* in other words, we must be imbued with the spirit of Christ. The truth should be proclaimed by men who, in their measure, have the same feelings, and are governed by the same motives with their divine Master. And what was the spirit which he evinced during his ministry on earth? It was that of supreme devotion to his Father's glory, and of tenderest compassion for the souls of men. He gave himself wholly to his work, "Know ye not," said he while yet a child, "that I must be about my Father's business?"—"My meat and my drink is to do the will of him that sent me." Find him where we may—at the sea-side, in the city, at the festive board, in the midst of thronging multitudes, alone with his disciples, or while resting for a moment by the fountain, in all places, in all companies, at all times, we find him occupied with the object of his mission, doing good to the bodies and the souls of men.

Such too was the spirit that animated his apostles, after they had been "endued with power from on high." In the courts of the temple, amid the assemblies of the synagogue, in the streets of Jerusalem, and from house to house, they ceased not to preach and to teach in the name of Jesus. Such was the manner of life, in particular, of that one, who though (as an apostle) "born out of due time," was in some respects the

greatest of them all. "By the space of three years," said he in his farewell charge to the assembled presbytery of Ephesus, 'night and day, publicly, and from house to house, with many tears, I ceased not to teach and exhort, and warn every man.' Well might *he* say to his son Timothy "be instant in season, out of season—meditate on these things, give thyself wholly to them;" for it was only asking the son to copy the illustrious example of his spiritual father.

Brethren! "these things are written for our learning." If we were more thoroughly imbued with the spirit of him who said, "the zeal of thy house hath eaten me up," if we followed more closely in the footsteps of that great apostle whose unbelieving countrymen occasioned continual sorrow of heart, and who watched over his converts with a godly jealousy, who kept his own body under lest he should himself be a castaway, would not our ministry put on a new phase? would we not ply with a more untiring diligence that divine instrument of the sinner's conversion and of the saint's holiness—the word of the Lord which endureth forever? It includes,

3. *Diligent prayer, or constant and intimate communion with Christ*, as the seat and source of all life and power.

It has been well said, that in the kingdom of God, it is not great deeds that are commended, but great deeds done by faith. Victories gained by heroic courage, by consummate policy, by argument and eloquence, are not peculiar to the family of God. The triumphs which refresh the church, and bring especial honor to her Head, are such only as are marked by faith and prayer. And accordingly we find in all the past ages of the church's history, that none has ever won for himself great renown, who did not cultivate intimate communion with God. Luther's saying about prayer is well known, and his own practice accorded with it. John Welsh, with a parish of 3000 souls, spent eight hours daily in prayer and fellowship with God. Of Robert Bruce, another burning and shining light of that age, by whom many thousands were brought to the knowledge of Christ, it is said "that he was a great wrestler, having more than ordinary familiarity with his divine Master."

But it is needless to multiply instances. To whatever period we go, if we examine the records of the inner life of those who have been eminently successful as ministers, we shall invariably discover that they "abounded in prayer." How true was this of that venerable father, who was lately taken from the midst of us.* Profound learning and eloquence of speech he did not pretend to, though he knew their value in their place, but he was in a remarkable degree a man of prayer—"a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith," and few men can be found whose ministry has yielded more abundant fruit.

Fathers and Brethren: let us seek to be endued with the spirit of grace and supplication by which apostles, and reformers, and all the truly great men in the church of God, have been distinguished;—through which they have "wrought righteousness, subdued kingdoms, and turned to flight the armies of the aliens." And let us remember that "the same God over all is rich unto all who call upon him." The treasury of grace is as full as ever, and the new and living way of access to it, consecrated by the blood of Jesus, is as open now as in past ages. We have the same precious promises which saints of other days made their songs; and He who gave them is "the same yesterday, to-day, and forever." If then our faces shine not with the glory that beams forth from the Son of God, the reason is that we never ascend to the high and holy place of his abode. If we do not "know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings," it can only be because we are unwilling to sit at the feet of Jesus and receive the outflowings of his divine wisdom. For one of the gracious words that dropped from his lips while on earth, and recorded for the comfort of his church universal, is "Ask and ye shall receive—that your joy may be full."

I cannot conclude without saying that the subject comes home to us as a *body*, as well as individuals. Why are we constituted into a Presbytery? For the very same end for which,

* The late Dr. Alexander Proudfit, for many years minister of Salem, N. Y.

as ministers we preach and dispense sacraments, viz., the glory of Christ in the salvation of men. In our corporate capacity, then, the Master says to us—"Follow me."

Now it seems to me that there is one point in regard to which Christ is addressing us as a church very distinctly, and that is, to follow him in the leadings of his providence. The work in which he would have us to engage with special diligence is clearly indicated. There is a large and constantly growing stream of emigration flowing into our country, from the old world. Every year witnesses the arrival upon our shores of thousands of Scottish and Irish Presbyterians. They come, for the most part, with strong attachments not only to our system of faith, but our forms of worship. And even admitting that there is no reason on the score of principle why the smaller branches of the church should not be incorporated with the larger, until the latter are brought to feel a proper sympathy for the Scottish and Irish emigrant, a wise expediency would require the former to keep up a distinct organization. I cannot enlarge upon this subject so fully as its importance would justify; but I may say that there are the best of reasons for believing that there are many families in our large cities who would have been forced to exclaim, "no one cares for our souls," if it had not been for the existence of our church and others nearly related. Here then is a wide and inviting field of labor within our own presbyterial bounds; and if the church can only be induced to enter it, not under the impulse of sectarian selfishness, but from a sincere desire to honor Christ and to save souls, if instead of waiting, until people come "to ask supplies," she herself goes forth to search out and bring in the sheep scattered abroad, she has a pledge in recent events, as well as the divine promise, that her efforts shall not be in vain. Let us then begin the work at once. Let us each one ponder "what Israel ought to do;" and in the right spirit of Christian aggressiveness set about doing it. Let not unbelief tie our hands. Let none say we are weak and few, and can accomplish nothing. He who calls us has infinite

resources ; and if we only follow Him fully, we shall certainly become "fishers of men."*

* I may be allowed to say, that the extension of our church in New England during the last few years decidedly confirms the truth of the above remarks. Loud as is the call from the ever-spreading West, there is a no less earnest cry from the ever-growing East. We would not have the church shut her ear to either. Both should be heard.