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S E R M O N

A T T H E I N S T A L L A T I O N O F T H E

REV. DUNCAN KENNEDY, D. D.

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# S E R M O N

PREACHED ON WEDNESDAY EVENING, JULY 11, 1855,

AT THE INSTALLATION OF THE

REV. DUNCAN KENNEDY, D. D.,

AS PASTOR OF THE

SECOND STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, TROY.

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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.,

PASTOR OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ALBANY.

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A L B A N Y :

VAN BENTHUYSEN, PRINTER, 407 BROADWAY.

1855.

# SERMON.

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II. TIMOTHY, II., 15.

RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH.

He who spake as never man spake, gave to his disciples whom He commissioned to publish the Gospel, many counsels and directions, which, in their general import, are equally applicable to all their successors. But the more minute directory to ministerial duty He left to be framed by his noble Apostle, Paul; and accordingly we find, in Paul's Epistles, every thing pertaining to the office of a Christian minister, set forth with the utmost simplicity, clearness and force. The Epistles to Timothy, though addressed originally to an individual, may be considered as an inspired charge to every one who is called to the same high office—a charge extending to all the details of a minister's duty, to the sources of his

danger, and the means of his success. The passage which I have just read to you, contains at once a most simple and most comprehensive direction; than which I can imagine nothing better suited to the occasion that has convened us—“*Rightly dividing the word of truth.*” Let us hold this passage to our minds a few moments, and we shall find, if I mistake not, that it supplies the legitimate answers to two grand questions comprehending a large part of a minister’s duty—namely, *What* he shall preach, and *How* he shall preach.

I. Here is a distinct recognition of what must constitute the *material of our preaching*—it is “THE WORD OF TRUTH.” By *the word of truth* we are to understand whatever has been revealed to us by the God of truth. There are certain great truths constituting what is commonly called Natural Religion, which are written, more or less legibly, on all God’s handiwork, and especially on the constitution of our moral nature. As these truths were adapted to man’s condition as a sinless being, so they were readily perceived, while yet sin had brought no film over the moral and mental eye; but the introduction of sin

at once rendered man in a great degree blind to these truths, and rendered the truths themselves inadequate to his religious necessities. Hence, if man were to be saved, there must be some clearer and more extended revelation than Nature and Providence supply—a revelation that should bring into a brighter light those essential truths which seem at best dim and shadowy to the eye of a perverted reason, and that should bring out from the secret place of God's wisdom and sovereignty another set of truths adapted to man's present condition, and constituting a new and remedial economy. Here then, in the Word of God, is this double purpose answered—as Christianity is based upon Natural Religion, so she has explained, authenticated, and adopted as her own, every truth that Natural Religion teaches; while yet she has superadded to this her own peculiar doctrine of salvation for the lost. All the duties which man owed to his Maker as a sinless being, he owes to Him still; while there are other duties growing out of his relation to God, as a sinner, which are peculiar to the evangelical economy. Both these classes of duties, in connexion with the

doctrines that form their basis, are clearly set forth in the Bible, constituting what the Apostle in our text calls "the word of truth." Here is the great treasury from which a minister must draw, who would approve himself to God as a workman that needeth not to be ashamed.

But it is necessary, in order to accomplish the design of the ministry, to preach not only the *truth*, but the *whole* truth. I do not mean that we are required, under ordinary circumstances, to crowd all the doctrines of Christianity into a single discourse; for the effect of that must inevitably be, to leave, in most cases, but a general and ill-defined impression. Nor do I mean that every part of the Bible is literally to form the theme of a minister's public instructions; for if every portion of Scripture history and Scripture prophecy, and all the judicial and ritual details of the Jewish economy, were to be distinctly considered, it would require a ministry of ante-diluvian length, to accomplish it. All that I intend to say is, that the system of divine truth revealed in the Bible must be preached in its integrity, provided the period of active labour be long

enough to admit of it. All the doctrines and precepts, all the promises and threatenings, and an outline at least of history and prophecy, come fairly within the range of a minister's commission; and nothing short of this comes up to the idea of preaching the whole truth.

There are various influences by which a minister may be tempted to an incomplete exhibition of his message. There may be that in his natural temperament or taste that will expose him to this evil. If he be naturally ardent and severe, the danger is that he will fail to present Christianity in its most attractive features, and will practically regard a portion of God's word as too tame for his purpose. If he be naturally gentle and mild, the danger is that he may, in obedience to his instinctive impulses, dwell too exclusively on the gracious provision and the benignant spirit of the Gospel, to the neglect of the peril which it reveals and the threatenings which it denounces. If he be of a naturally timid spirit, or if he be ambitious of popular applause, and have in his congregation men of high standing and influence, whose hearts revolt at the more humbling truths of the

Bible, here again, it cannot be disguised that there is a powerful temptation to limit himself to those topics in which the offence of the cross, if seen at all, is seen only in the back-ground. He satisfies himself perhaps with the reflection that he always preaches the truth; while yet there are some truths which his people may indeed learn from the Bible, but never from his ministrations.

And, finally, he must preach not only the *truth*, and the *whole* truth, but *nothing but* the truth. Suppose he has among his hearers a few highly gifted and erudite minds, who ask to be fed with some finer wheat than the plain Gospel—may he not, if he has the ability, occasionally at least, adventure, for their sake, into the fields of philosophical inquiry, and endeavour to make that plain which God has left dark? Never, unless he would stain his own character, and peril his own destiny, as a minister of Christ. Suppose he has strong convictions on questions of politics, that have become matter of party conflict, and are absorbing, for the time, the public attention—would it not be at least pardonable in him, if he should use the pulpit in defence of his own



political views, and in an effort to expose or confound the opposite party? Here again, I answer unhesitatingly, No; for though I will not say that a case may not occur in which it would be very proper that our public and national concerns should pass under review, in the pulpit, as a ground for humiliation or thanksgiving, yet this is quite a different matter from intermeddling with the ordinary party strifes of the day; and no minister can indulge in the latter without offending at once against the dignity and the sacredness of his office. I care not what it is that he preaches—if it is not legitimately included in the word of truth, it has usurped a place which does not belong to it; and he has performed a service not only not required, but absolutely forbidden, by the Master. When the Bible furnishes such a multitude of themes of the most practical, sublime and momentous import—themes which concentrate the wisdom of the Godhead, and bear the impress of divine authority, how utterly without excuse is that minister, who allows himself to descant upon topics which are not even recognized in God's word!

But the text is a guide to ministers in respect not only to the *matter*, but the *manner* of their preaching—not only is the word of truth to form the material of their message, but they are RIGHTLY TO DIVIDE the word of truth. And what does this imply?

It implies, in the first place, that the truth should be preached in its *right relations*. Notwithstanding the truths of the Bible are not revealed in the form of a system, yet as there is order in all God's other works, so there is order here also; and the contemplative mind quickly discovers it, and recognizes in it a decisive index to a divine origin. As every other science consists of an assemblage of truths harmoniously arranged, each holding its proper place, and each deriving its significance chiefly from its relation to the rest, so it is also with the science of Theology—the various truths of which it is composed, cannot be held to the mind in intelligent and devout contemplation, but that they range themselves into a beautiful and well ordered system. One truth is perceived to result from another; one, to qualify another; one, to impart to another that in which consists its

beauty or its power; while the whole, taken together, form a system of mutual dependance and perfect harmony.

Now it results from this characteristic feature of the word of truth, that it is vastly important that it should be preached in its proper relations. Suppose these be disregarded—not only is the hearer's edification in a great degree sacrificed, but, as the case may be, the very truth that is preached, may have all the effect of positive error. For instance, the doctrine of justification by faith may be considered as one of the primary glories of the Gospel; but you have only to separate it from the corresponding doctrine of sanctification by the Holy Spirit, or the obligation of obedience to the divine will, to transmute it into undisguised Antinomianism. And even the different attributes of the divine character, if you consider them singly, are far from appearing in their legitimate attractions: it is only when they are seen to qualify each other—to melt into each other, like the colours of the bow, that each appears to the highest advantage, and the whole combination takes on the form of infinite glory. Most of the

great errors which have prevailed in connexion with Christianity, have originated from one-sided views of the divine character—from exalting one attribute, or set of attributes, at the expense of another; whereas it will always be found that those who view the divine character in the integrity and harmony of its perfections, will never wander far from the record in respect to any other portion of revealed truth. I say then, let the truth be preached in its proper connexions; let one doctrine be made to qualify another, as it does in God's word; and let it be shown how much the beauty and efficacy of the whole system depend on the harmony with which the various parts are combined; and at least one important point will be gained towards rightly dividing the word of truth.

But another point of equal importance is, that the truth should be preached in its *right proportions*. I have already said that it devolves upon a minister, as he has opportunity, to preach the whole evangelical system; but he is not to dwell equally upon every part of it. All the various parts of a building are important, and we could not

perhaps dispense with any of them, without marring its proportions or lessening its accommodations; but we do not attach to all of them the same importance that we do to the foundation. In like manner, each of the doctrines and precepts of the Gospel is necessary to the perfect system of which it forms a part; nor may we venture to exclude any of them from our public ministrations; but still there is a great difference in their relative importance, and there should be a corresponding difference in the frequency with which we expound and urge them. The grand, central truth of Christianity is, that Jesus Christ died to save the lost;—and this we are always to keep in the fore-ground of our preaching. But then, there are many other truths that cluster about, and revolve around, this fundamental one,—some of which indeed may be considered as scarcely more than this in its legitimate amplification or remoter bearings—which also claim a due proportion of our regard. Here then we are supplied with a standard by which we may judge of the relative importance of different portions of the word of truth, and of the greater or less

prominence which we are to allow to each in our ministrations—it is just according to the proximity of each to the great doctrine of Christ offering himself up a sacrifice for the sins of men. I may very properly urge upon the consideration of my hearers the great moral precepts of the Gospel, designed to regulate our social conduct—indeed I should be unfaithful to my obligations as a minister, if I were not to do this—but if I were to devote nearly every sermon to the inculcation of industry, or honesty, or charity, or even to the more solemn themes of the uncertainty of life, and the certainty and nearness of death, and only occasionally cast a glance at the cross,—though no one might be able to charge me with preaching any thing but the truth, every reflecting person would see that I was chargeable with not preaching the truth in its right proportions,—of course that I had failed rightly to divide the word of truth. I should have reason to expect also, that the result of such preaching would furnish to me a practical testimony that I had wielded the sword of the Spirit in vain.

I only add that, in rightly dividing the word of truth, is implied the preaching of the truth in its *right adaptations*.

Every part of divine truth is fitted to exert some influence—there is some principle in human nature to which it appeals—some necessity of human nature to which it is adapted. Man is not only an imperfect, but a sinful, being—he is not only diseased in the very elements of his nature, but is constantly subjected to corrupting and ensnaring influences—there is moral contagion lurking in the very atmosphere he breathes. So too he is also susceptible of sorrow; and he can never be assured, even in the most joyous moment, that some barbed arrow may not be winging its way toward his heart. Now, with a nature which is the seat at once of strong propensities to sin, and of deep susceptibilities to suffering, and living in a world in which there is so much to minister to both, what he has to aspire to, is to walk uprightly, securely, serenely, through the path of life, and to make his final dwelling place amidst the glories of immortality. He has moral diseases that need to be healed; inward reproaches that need to

be silenced; feeble resolutions that need to be strengthened; deep yearnings after happiness that need to be met; but to all these wants of the human spirit the word of truth adapts itself—it is fitted to mould man, fallen and degraded as he is, into a seraph; to act as a minister of consolation to him while he dwells in this vale of tears, and finally to raise him to a world where God Himself hath declared that all tears shall be wiped away.

The slightest observation of the world reveals to us the fact that there is a great variety of condition and character among men; and in the light of divine revelation, this variety becomes more strongly marked, and assumes a greatly increased importance. The minister often knows only in general the circumstances and wants of those whom he addresses—he knows that they are all fallen creatures, and need salvation through the blood of Christ—he may, in most cases, safely take for granted that the two great classes—saints and sinners, are represented in his audience; but of the details of each one's inward experience, perhaps he can scarcely form a conjecture. The wounded spirit may be concealed beneath the



joyous face. The great question of life and death may be setting the conscience at work as an engine of torture, while the lips maintain in respect to it an unbroken silence. The heart may be brooding over purposes of evil, that have never transpired even in a whisper. Some deep, hidden process of mind may be going forward, which shall have its issue in speedy conversion, or final reprobation. But how shall a minister know of these varied experiences, unless the secret chambers of the heart are thrown open to him? But as he knows that these and various other states of mind do exist, and some or other of them may be presumed always to be found among those whom he addresses, it is right that he should preach with reference to all these different phases of experience, even though he may not know, in any given case, of an individual before him to whom his message is *particularly* adapted. Among sinners there is a difference, and that difference he is required to recognize—among saints too there is a great diversity of experience and attainment; of imperfection, and corruption, and temptation; and to this also his ministrations are to be

accommodated; and if he judiciously address himself to these different cases, even though he draw his bow somewhat at a venture, he need have no fear but that the design of the ministry will be accomplished.

But while, in the ordinary course of our ministry, we need only decide on the relative importance of different truths, in order to settle the question of adaptation, we cannot doubt that we are bound often to take counsel of the outer world—of the movements of God's providence, in order that we may give the most successful direction to our ministrations. Sometimes God is pleased to send his Spirit to operate in a community with unwonted power—the reign of carelessness is disturbed, and the public mind seems open to the reception of the truth, and the public conscience aroused to the application of it; and multitudes have their eyes fixed upon the strait gate and narrow way—can there be any doubt that, in such circumstances, man's depravity and Christ's atonement, repentance of sin and faith in the Redeemer, the dangers of self deception and the evidences of Christian character, should be urged even to the exclu-

sion of many topics of moral and social bearing which God's word supplies, and which, in other circumstances, might form legitimate themes of public instruction. In like manner, events of providence—the deaths of eminent men, great national blessings or calamities, convulsions in nature, the pestilence and famine, the fire and flood—any of these may very properly direct the course of thought into which a minister leads his people; and I cannot but think that that minister who, from any consideration, should fail to interpret these great events, and show how the thoughts of the divine mind are to be traced in the movements of the divine hand, would forego one important means of benefitting his people, as well as fail, in a measure, of rightly dividing the word of truth.

But I think I hear some one ask whether, in what I have just said, I am not falling in with one of the great practical errors of the day—that of degrading the pulpit by the introduction of mere wordly themes; nay, whether I am not contradicting one of my own positions—namely, that a minister has no right to preach any thing but God's living

truth. I answer, if the passing events of providence are brought forward merely for the sake of literary display, or the gratification of curiosity, or ministering to an unhealthy excitement, then this kind of preaching becomes evil and only evil; and just in proportion as it prevails, the dignity of the pulpit must sink, and its efficiency be greatly hindered. But if, on the other hand, these events are used simply to illustrate and enforce God's revealed truth—if the design of the preacher be only to show that the teachings of the Bible find a clear response in the voices of Nature and Providence, and that God's communications to mortals are *all* to be heeded, no matter through what channel they may come, then is he as really preaching the truth, when he is making use of these palpable illustrations, as if he were drawing his material from the very letter of the word. Suppose some fearful tornado were to pass over your city, leaving nothing but desolation in its track; or suppose the demon of war were to be unchained, and wave his bloody wand over this nation; or suppose the nation's Head were to die, while the honours of supreme

magistracy were yet fresh upon him ; or suppose some great national deliverance were to be experienced, when terrible calamities seemed inevitable ; or suppose, finally, a state of things that should involve not only the stagnation of commercial enterprise, but the general wreck of men's fortunes—I ask whether a minister shall not be allowed,—or rather whether he is not required, to endeavour to turn these things to account in regard to the spiritual interests of his people. If he would illustrate the power, the justice, the goodness of God, the deep depravity of man, the uncertainty of life's enjoyments and of life itself, and the importance of laying up treasure in Heaven, (and no one can deny that these are Scripture topics,) how can he better accomplish his purpose than by appealing directly to the observation of his hearers—by showing them how these various truths are rendered visible and palpable by events that are passing before their eyes? Need I add that, in this mode of dispensing divine truth, we have the sanction of the highest of all examples—for there was not a more distinctive characteristic of the preaching of the

Son of God, than the admirable felicity with which He drew from both Nature and Providence his lessons of Heavenly wisdom.

If it were not for protracting unreasonably this exercise, I should proceed to state some of the reasons why every minister should prosecute his labours in the spirit of the Apostolic injunction we have been considering; but I cannot dissemble my conviction that, instead of occupying time that does not belong to me, it rather becomes me to apologize for bearing any part in the services of this hour. I need not say how highly and gratefully I appreciate the extraordinary courtesy which this venerable Presbytery have shown me, in allowing the partiality of my friends so repeatedly to designate me to a service which appropriately belonged to one of their own number;\* and I feel bound to add that, though, in the present case, the request came from a brother whose wishes have always been laws to me, it was not without many scruples, on the score of delicacy, that I could bring myself, even after I was assured that it had received

\* This was the third installation sermon which the author had preached in Troy.

the Presbyterian sanction, to comply with it. At the same time, I frankly own that I regard it a privilege to be here. I am glad to mingle, for an hour, even though it be in an official way, with brethren who have so often welcomed me as if I had been one of their own body. I am glad to be in any way connected with an occasion of so much interest to one of my most cherished friends, between whom and myself, during the constant intercourse of fourteen years, there has never been so much as a doubtful look. I am glad to have the opportunity of congratulating this congregation, on being permitted to see the place vacated by their late able and respected pastor,\* so speedily and worthily filled; of assuring them of what indeed they know well enough already—that they have every thing to hope from the ability and fidelity, the tenderness and firmness, of the man of their present choice; and of joining in the prayers that are here offered up, that God's richest blessings may crown and consecrate this endearing relation. It has been my privilege to enjoy

\* Rev. Dr. Halley.

the friendship of not only the pastors, but many of the members of this church, from its commencement: the associations of the place in which I stand are therefore all familiar and pleasant to me; and in the accession of my beloved and honoured brother to his new pastorate, I gratefully recognize a pledge that they will not be less so in the future than they have been in the past. I must be permitted to say, even in his own presence, that I have no fear that he will disappoint your highest hopes; and I know I need not bespeak in his behalf your generous sympathy, your earnest prayers, your vigorous and hearty co-operation. Long, long may he be spared rightly to divide to you the word of truth. Grateful may his presence be in your circles of Christian friendship, in your scenes of domestic sorrow, and beside your beds of death. And may the blessed savour of his ministry continue fragrant in your dwellings, when they shall be occupied by other generations, and you and he shall have borne a grateful testimony to each others' fidelity before the eternal throne.



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$$9) 102 \cdot 1 \quad (4 \cdot 3)$$

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