

# THE HOMILETIC REVIEW.

VOL. XXX.—AUGUST, 1895.—No. 2.

## REVIEW SECTION.

### I.—THE PREACHER AND THE PREACHING FOR THE PRESENT CRISIS.

By D. S. GREGORY, D.D., LL.D., EX-PRESIDENT OF LAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY, AND LATE MANAGING EDITOR OF THE STANDARD DICTIONARY.

#### 2.—THE PREACHER'S MESSAGE.

II. *The Preaching of the Law.*—The message of the preacher should most assuredly embrace both the Law and the Gospel—the Law of God and man's lost condition under it, and the Gospel as the divine provision for salvation. It must go without saying, among evangelical Christians, that the preacher's message, in both its matter and authority, rests back on the word of God. It behooves him to inquire diligently and first of all: "What has the divine word to say on this all-important subject of the way of salvation?"

The pages of the Bible obviously abound in incidental presentations, literal and figurative, of the nature and method of salvation. But, as this is the one all-important subject of revelation, it is not left to mere incidental illustration. In the Old Testament it is the heart of the whole sacrificial and priestly system and ritual, on which the religion of Judaism rested or of which it mainly consisted. In the New Testament three of the principal epistles of Paul are devoted to the doctrine of salvation, with the purpose of exhibiting the truth on that subject, and of guarding against the three errors into which Jew, Greek and Roman—the world-races of that age and the representative and typical men of all time—were peculiarly liable to fall. In the Epistle to the Galatians, it is shown for the Jew, the representative of religious forms and ceremonies, that man is not to be saved by the observance of the ceremonial law, in which he was inclined to trust; but by faith in Christ and "circumcision of the heart." In the Epistles to the Corinthians, it is made clear to the Greek, the representative of reason and philosophy, that salvation is not to be obtained by human wisdom, on which he was accustomed to rest his faith; but by faith in "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," "who

### III.—SENSATIONAL PREACHING.

BY T. D. WITHERSPOON, D.D., LL.D., PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS AND PASTORAL THEOLOGY IN THE SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, LOUISVILLE, KY.

THE terms *sensation*, *sensational*, and *sensationalist*, as applied to preachers and preaching, are in such current use amongst us that they have become familiar and even commonplace. They are on everybody's lips. They answer to mental concepts that seem to us clearly defined. They have the power of calling up the most vivid emotions of reprehension. The sensational preacher is an odious character. His presence profanes the pulpit. His performances merit and receive the severest denunciation. But what is a sensational preacher? Wherein does his preaching differ from that of other popular preachers whom we approve and commend? We shall probably find it difficult to give a sharp-cut, clearly defined answer.

If we turn to the dictionaries to help us we shall be greatly disappointed. Webster gives, as the nearest approach to a definition of "sensation," in the sense in which we use the word, "a state of excited interest or feeling." "Sensational" he defines as "that which is attended by, or fitted to excite, great interest." Of "sensationalist" he gives no definition that approaches at all the meaning we currently give it. We are waiting with great anxiety for the appearance of the second volume of the great "Standard Dictionary." It will doubtless give us definitions more suited to our wants.\*

I have called attention to these definitions, however, principally for the purpose of illustrating the fact that there is a very just and proper sense in which all real preaching must be more or less sensational. The direct aim of the true preacher, especially in that class of sermons which is more hortatory in character, must be to produce a "state of excited interest or feeling." A discourse which was not "attended by, or fitted to produce, great interest," might lay claim to be a theological disquisition, or a philosophical essay, or a sentimental rhapsody, but it could not with any propriety be called a sermon. It is of the very nature of the sermon that it seeks to persuade men, to arouse them to action; and this can only be done by bringing them into a state of excited interest or feeling. The fatal defect in much that is called preaching is that it fails to be, in this sense of the lexicographer quoted, sensational. It is neither attended by nor fitted to excite great interest. The preacher himself never attains to any excited interest, and you would as soon expect gunpow-

\* Since this article was written, Volume 2 of the "Standard Dictionary" has been issued. One of its definitions of "Sensationalism" is as follows: "The exercise of sensational methods, particularly the publication or proclamation of that which gratifies improper curiosity or satisfies desire to be startled or strongly moved; also, that which produces such sensations; as, *sensationalism* invades even the pulpit."

der to explode at the touch of an icicle as to expect excited interest under his preaching. He tells the wondrous story of the Cross in the same impassive manner and with the same drowsy monotone as if he were reciting the dimensions of Ezekiel's temple, or reading a genealogical table from the Book of Chronicles. There are men with whom the thermometer of emotion never seems to rise above the freezing-point; who, as Professor Phelps says, "preach on the atonement as Agassiz would have lectured on an Amazonian fish, or on the glacial theory." Who that has ever heard one of these cold, sensible, imperturbable men, fastidiously and elegantly crooning a congregation into a state of both natural and spiritual somnolency, has not felt an almost irresistible impulse to cry, *fire!* or do something else sensational, to break the dead and dreary calm. When the heart of a church has fallen asleep; when the conscience is no longer aroused, and the spiritual emotions are no longer quickened under the preaching of the word; the truth which comes in thunder-tones of threatening or denunciation, if it be winged by the power of the Holy Spirit, must produce a sensation. And so the great preachers of all ages of the church have been in this sense sensational. They have broken in upon the dull, stately round of religious ceremonies and proprieties like one shouting, *fire!* in the midst of a staid and silent worshipping assembly. The prophets of the Old Economy, the Apostles who "turned the world upside down," the great friar preachers of the Middle Ages, Luther, Knox, Whitfield, Wesley, Chalmers, Spurgeon, all have been amenable to the charge of sensationalism, all have been, in the best and truest sense, sensational preachers.

It may be asked then, where lies the difference between the preaching of these men and that of those whom we condemn? What is there peculiar in the sensation that the latter affect? I answer that the distinction is threefold—found in the nature of the feeling excited, in the end for which it is excited, and in the methods by which it is excited. Let us look at each of these for a moment.

First, as to the nature of the feeling excited; it is evident that it makes a profound difference whether the emotion aroused by the speaker is sensitive, esthetic, scientific, or whether it is moral and spiritual. In either case, if the emotion be suddenly and skilfully awakened there is a sensation, but how different the character and value of the sensation and consequently of the preaching that produces it!

Now our first count against the preaching that is popularly termed sensational is that it appeals, almost exclusively, to the lower and less rational class of emotions. One can never arouse to too great excitement the emotions of love to Christ or hatred of sin. But these emotions lie deep. They are hard to reach in the hearts where they now exist, harder still to enkindle in hearts that are strangers to them. "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." There is another class of emotions that are much nearer the surface, and yield

themselves much more readily to the hand that would play upon them. There is, particularly, a class of sympathetic emotions well known to the tragedian and to the masters of the comic art. To one who understands the laws that govern these emotions it is comparatively easy to make men weep and to make them laugh, to carry them suddenly and startlingly from one extreme of feeling to the other. The exercise of this power is exhilarating. A reputation for it makes one popular; and so there is a great temptation to exert power in awakening and controlling these natural emotions to the neglect of those profound spiritual emotions upon the cultivation of which the whole spiritual life depends. On the occasion of a visit made by one of the most popular pulpit orators of the day, to the church of which I was then pastor, I asked a lady of unusual intelligence and culture her estimate of him as a preacher. Her answer was, "I have heard him on various occasions and in different places. I never want to hear him again; he is too cruel." On my expressing surprise, especially at the last clause, she added: "I like for a man to make me cry, but not when he always has to kill a baby to do it." It is needless to add that when the great orator came, and, in his sermon, introduced with matchless skill the deathbed scene of a little child, with the agonized parents bending over it, and the audience was bathed in tears, just such tears as an actor could have drawn, the remark of the gentle critic came to my mind and spoiled all the pathos for me. It was a criticism once made by Rev. Dr. John H. Rice upon another great pulpit orator, that he "always overlaid the Divine with the human in his preaching." He had reference to the same thing, the play upon the merely sympathetic, human-nature emotions of the hearers. And yet how much of the popularity and power of the sensational preacher is to be attributed to this source!

Again, this popular sensationalism differs from the true in object or aim. The true preacher arouses emotion, of whatever kind it may be, not for itself; not for the sense of conscious power which it gratifies, nor for the answering emotion which it arouses in his own heart, but as a means to a higher and nobler end. In holy forgetfulness of self, and with burning zeal for the salvation of souls, his only object in arousing emotion is that he may stimulate to action, that he may stir the will to such righteous and holy volitions as shall bring it into line with all God's purposes and plans in redemption. You can see at once what an immeasurable difference there is between the man who, having his soul penetrated with the thought of the lost and perilous condition of his audience, should stir such emotion as Jonathan Edwards did in his famous sermon at Northampton, and the man whose aim rises no higher than that of throwing his audience for the time into a state of pleasurable or tender emotion. How much of what is known as the popular preaching of the day partakes, if not in methods at least in spirit, of this dramatic character! How much

of the popularity of the preacher depends on his being to the people "as one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument,"—even the tender chords of sympathetic human hearts!

But it is time we should pass to consider the last and most conspicuous point of difference, namely, that of method. I purposely use the word *conspicuous* because, while this form of sensationalism is the most flagrant, and therefore the most obnoxious to public criticism, it may be seriously questioned if it is really as harmful as the one we have just been considering. Its open disregard of the sanctities and even the proprieties of the sacred desk, shocks the religious sentiment and offends the cultivated tastes of those who would otherwise come under its power, and in this way it is kept from working the demoralization that it would otherwise produce.

These sensational methods are so well known as to require little explanation. There is, for instance, the choice and announcement of a sensational theme. Some novel and out-of-the-way subject is selected and advertised so as to catch the popular eye. It may be a professedly Biblical one, as "The Funeral of Adam," etc.; or, more probably, it will be some hobby of popular literature, popular science, or popular reform; or, more probably still, some recent and exciting event, the death of some public man of the nation, the sinking of some unfortunate ship at sea, some great conflagration, some railway disaster, or something of that kind. The sensational preacher of this class, instead of searching the Scriptures through the week for a theme for the Lord's day, makes the daily papers his Bible. With the eye of the vulture and the scent of the jackal he is on the lookout for his prey. It is often a question if some great national calamity is not hailed as a godsend by spiritually impecunious preachers of this order, more even than by the sensational class of reporters for the secular press. The choice of a theme of this kind is an advertisement to the public of the fact, that in the judgment of the preacher the great themes of the Gospel have lost their interest for the people, and that something more attractive than religion must be found to draw them to the house of God.

Another of these sensational methods consists in taking an appropriate Scriptural theme and tricking it up in fantastic garb. This was probably more popular a hundred years ago than now. Thus we read of such subjects announced as "Beelzebub Driving and Drowning his Hogs," "Baruch's Sore gently Opened, and the Salve Applied," "The Church's Bowel Complaint," "The Snuffers of Divine Love," etc., etc. But those old divines are not without their imitators at the present day. To refer to but a single instance, we have volumes of sermons from a noted living divine with such catchpenny titles as "Due-Bills Presented," "Fishing too Near Shore," "The Battle of the Pitchers," "The Religion of Ghosts," etc.

**There is another form of this sensationalism in method which may**

perhaps be most fitly characterized as the quixotic, in which the preacher makes himself the champion of some cause which is the expression of a popular, but unthinking and unreasonableness, prejudice. Such an uprising of prejudice is the golden opportunity of the sensational preacher. Instead of aiding to stem the tide, he rides into popularity upon it, as the ambitious Jeroboam rode into power upon the grievances of "the dear people" in Israel. A conspicuous instance of this was seen on the occasion of the first issue of the present Revised Version of the Scriptures. It will be remembered how, on the Sabbath following, when the minds of the common people were disturbed with apprehension that the new version would in some way impair faith in the inspiration of the Bible, a prominent Brooklyn pastor, after an advertisement that had drawn an immense crowd, went through the dramatic action, at the proper point in his sermon, of hugging to his breast his great pulpit Bible and lugging it around the platform with the avowal of his determination to defend at all hazards the old Bible upon which his mother had pillowed her head, etc. Now it will be seen at once that if the Bible had been in any real danger; if those men who met in the Westminster chamber had been infidels bent on destroying the faith, and not reverent Christian scholars, seeking to confirm it, his action would not in any improper sense have been sensational. If a man should rush out upon the sidewalk of a city street, seize a woman by the arm and drag her, frightened and astonished, into the doorway just in time to save her from the jaws of a mad dog, you would not call his act sensational; but if he should do the same thing to keep a few drops of water from falling upon her spring bonnet, I think we should characterize his act as sensational in the highest degree. Now it is this kind of quixotism, this running tilts with religious windmills, this want of intense spiritual purpose, which makes much of the preaching of the day, in an evil sense, sensational.

The last and most disgusting of these forms of sensationalism is that which, as its pulpit claptrap, makes use of ludicrous anecdotes, stale jokes, and pulpit slang. There are men among us whose stock of pulpit attractions consists almost exclusively of anecdotes, witticisms, and numerous conceits, that are offensive alike to good sense, pure taste, and true Christian feeling. These men are the mountebanks of the pulpit. They bring to it all the arts of the patent medicine vender on the street-corner with his gaping crowd around him. No amount of excoriation, through the press or the pulpit, seriously disturbs these men. It is rather of the nature of a free advertisement of their cheap wares. And yet what honest man can keep from crying out against the buffoon who, in the name of religion and under the solemn sanctions of the ministry, makes of his pulpit a mere harlequin-booth, or a comic stage, on which he may swagger in fool's buskin with grin and grimace to tickle the risibles of the gaping crowd?

From all such pulpit drollery and clerical buffoonery we turn again to that true sensationalism which should characterize the preaching of the man who is to arouse dead souls from their lethargic slumber and to pluck brands from the everlasting burning. The true preacher has no need of the meretricious arts of the comedian and the harlequin. He is the herald of truths of such momentous interest that, if properly presented, they must agitate men's souls to their profoundest depths. What the preacher needs is to have his own soul penetrated with a sense of the supreme importance of the message he brings, to come himself under its full power, and so enter his pulpit under the flowing tide of that spiritual emotion which comes from deep thinking baptized with fervent prayer; and as he thus speaks under the power of spiritual truth and under the baptism of the Holy Ghost, his lips will be touched with an eloquence, and his words will kindle with a fire, that no art of man can rival, and he will be saved from all the pompous platitudes, the florid nonsense, the sickly sentimentalism, the silly story-telling, and the vulgar slang that make the repertoire of the modern pulpit sensationalist.

#### IV.—CHURCH LIFE AND CHURCH WORK: SUGGESTIONS BY LAYMEN.

BY THOMAS G. SHEARMAN,\* PLYMOUTH CHURCH, BROOKLYN.

I think that the Church is gradually developing from its own interior action, which makes it more useful than it was a hundred or fifty years ago. There is a certain corporate feeling in churches. What is true in the case of all other institutions—that the men that manage them come to think that the world exists for the sake of the institutions instead of the institutions for the sake of the world—is true also in the case of the Church; but that is inevitable. The Church needs to know that it exists for the sake of humanity and is made to serve the world; it needs to get rid of the old ecclesiastical idea that it is an institution existing for the sake of its own members, taking care of its own interests and treating the world as something for which it is not responsible. But it is growing out of that idea.

In regard to preaching, I do not believe in purely sensational sermons. Still, if a preacher has the gift of vivid picture-making and it comes natural to him to portray gospel truths in a pictorial, coruscating style, I do not think he should repress that gift. I decidedly disapprove of the strained efforts that are sometimes made by men to whom that style does not come naturally.

The disposition of the pulpit in most ages is toward a respectable kind of dulness arising from two causes:

The first is that, as nobody answers the preacher, there is no opposition to stir him up. The people in the congregation who undertake to correct his mistakes are almost invariably a class of grumblers and inferior critics whose suggestions do not do much good. The people who could give suggestions are generally silent. It is surprising that preachers do so well under the circumstances.

The second difficulty is that the pulpit has fallen into the hands of goody-

\* Interview with George J. Manson.