

Preachers' Methods

by J.W. McGarvey

The sermon emphasizes the importance of studying the Scriptures through various methods, including historical, book-by-book, topical, and devotional study, and the judicious use of Commentaries to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible.

Scripture: Proverbs 1:5, 1 Corinthians 9:24, Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Biblical Preaching", "Pastoral Ministry"

Description

J.W. McGarvey emphasizes the importance of systematic study and preparation for preachers, highlighting the need for experience, wise precepts, and continuous growth through the guidance of both experience and precept. He discusses the methods of studying the Scriptures historically, by books, by topics, and devotionally, stressing the necessity of thorough understanding and systematic study. McGarvey also touches on the study of other books, such as Commentaries and works on the Evidences of Christianity, to enhance preaching and defend the faith. Additionally, he advises on the special preparation for the pulpit, focusing on the purpose of sermons, the importance of heart-power, and the significance of adopting rules while allowing for individual adjustments. Lastly, he advocates for system in study, encouraging young preachers to engage in practical fieldwork, develop heart-power through experience, and adapt to various preaching situations.

Transcript

THE duties of preachers are usually well known. They lie on the very surface of the New Testament, and the preacher who does not know them is without excuse. But the best methods of discharging these duties are not so well known. They are not so easily learned, and but few of them are taught in the Scriptures.

There are two ways of learning methods. We learn them by experience and by precept. The latter should precede the former: for experience teaches largely by means of the mistakes which we make, and wise precept preceding experience, if heeded, must save us from many mistakes. But precept, however wise, is seldom accepted in its fulness until we have tested it by our own experience. Experience is the only guide that we are willing to trust implicitly, yet no man should ever consider himself too old or too wise to profit by the experience and the advice of others. The two teachers, experience and precept, should be heard continuously, and every preacher should continue to grow by the help of each until the inevitable decay of old age sets in.

The object of the present lecture is not to dictate, but to advise; not to suggest the only good method as though there were but one, but to state what appears to the speaker the best method of discharging the [83] duties which come under notice. Precepts of this kind are calculated not to better the minds of preachers, but rather to set them free by waking up thought, concerning methods which have been adopted without thought.

It is impossible to satisfactorily discuss, within the space of a single lecture, all the methods included in the subject which I have chosen. These might be distributed in a general way into Methods of Study, Methods of Delivery, Methods of Conducting Public Worship, Methods of Church Work, usually called Pastoral Work, and Methods of Personal Advancement. I will confine my remarks to the first of these and consider the methods, first, of studying the Scriptures, second, of studying other books, third, of making special preparation for the pulpit, and fourth of maintaining system in study.

I.

STUDY OF THE SCRIPTURES.

It is a common thought among the masses of the people that preachers pass their lives in studying the Bible. This appears to be their supreme work, requiring that they be freed from business cares and manual labor. It is doubtless true that they do study the Scriptures more than any other class of men, but no men know so well as preachers themselves, how woefully this duty is neglected. If I were to point out what I believe to be the greatest defect, not call it the greatest sin, in the lives of preachers, I think I would say it is their neglect of the word of God. The [84] common thought of the people just mentioned is that which ought to be. They have a right to demand of every preacher, after he shall have spent some years in his calling, that he be well acquainted with all of God's word, and that he be able to give an intelligent answer to the questions commonly arising on every part. In order to do this it is necessary that he shall have studied the Scriptures laboriously and systematically.

There are four methods of studying the Scriptures, all having their respective advantages and all necessary to the highest attainments. We may study them historically, by books, by topics and devotionally. We will speak of these methods separately and in the order named.

By the historical study of the Scripture we mean the study of its various events and records in the order of time. It aims at obtaining a knowledge of all the events recorded in it, including the composition of its various books, in the order of their occurrence. There are but few books in the Bible in which all the events which it mentions are arranged in chronological order, and there are many which cover the same period of time with other books. In all these instances the facts recorded must not only be known, but we must learn to know them as far as possible in the order of their occurrence. The books of Kings and Chronicles, for example, must be interwoven with one another on the warp of chronology, and all the events recorded as referred to in the contemporary writings of prophets and poets, must be assigned their proper places amid the events of the historical books. In this way alone [85] can we know in full the history of ancient Israel. In like manner, we must not only become acquainted with the four Gospels separately, but we must know the recorded events in the life of Jesus in the order of time if we would understand them; and so of Acts and the Epistles. Those Epistles which are contemporaneous with Acts, fill up in a good degree the historical gaps in that book, while the later Epistles continue the history of the apostolic church beyond the close of Acts.

Such a study of the whole Bible is absolutely necessary to the attainment of general Scripture knowledge. It lies at the very beginning of a course of Scripture study, and it lays the only broad foundation for all subsequent study of Scripture topics. It is by this means alone that the gradual progress of revelation, and the consequent gradual elevation of mankind can be understood; and it may be doubted whether any one important event, or the composition of any one book of the Bible can be properly understood until it is viewed, as this method of study alone enables us to view it in the light of the events and the writings which precede it, and of those which follow it. I would advise every preacher, both old and young, who has never pursued such a course of study, to undertake it at once, and to prosecute it with vigor.

The study of the Bible by books is involved, to a large extent, in the method of study just named, and especially is this true of the historical books. But a man may acquire a good knowledge of events recorded in a historical book without having studied the book [86] as a book--without, in other words, having given attention to the specific design of the book, as to the plan on which it is constructed. No one understands a book until he has done this. And in regard to the books which are not historical, while the student of sacred history may have gleaned the facts mentioned in these, and may have given the book itself and the author of it their proper place in the procession of biblical events, he may as yet have learned very little of what the book contains. When we have gleaned, for example, the historical facts embodied in the book of Job, in the Psalms, in Proverbs, in any of the prophets or in any of the epistles, how much remains that is yet to be learned? How much, too, that is, if possible, of more importance than the facts--matter to which the facts sustain only such a relation as does the scaffold to the building, or the golden framework to the gem which glitters within its embrace. In order to reach and gather this rich fruitage of Bible knowledge, every single book in the Bible must be made, in the course of a preacher's life, a subject of minute and patient study.

The method of studying a single book is simple and obvious. It requires that we first obtain a general conception of its design and its contents. This is obtained by reading it for that special purpose.

This prepares the way for the second step, which is to ascertain the general divisions of the book, together with the aim and contents of each. When this is accomplished the framework of the book, showing the plan on which it is constructed, is distinctly before the [87] mind, and we are prepared for the more minute examination of its particular parts. While reading it for these purposes, we will usually have formed some acquaintance with its historical connections, such as the time and circumstances under which it was written, and the influences at work upon the mind of the author. Next follows an exegetical study of every part by sentences and paragraphs. Much of this information can be obtained by reading an introduction to the book, but this is to obtain information at second hand--a process never to be adopted by a student except when the original sources are beyond his reach. Read introductions after you have studied the books and not before. Thus read, they may correct or modify your own conclusions, but read in advance they may mislead you and at best you are not able to judge of their correctness.

In addition to the study of Bible books separately, many of them should be studied in groups, according to their subject-matter, or the time of their composition. For example, the books containing the scattered statutes of the Mosaic law are a group by themselves; the prophets before the captivity, the prophets of the captivity, and the prophets after the captivity are three other groups. In the New Testament the four Gospels are a group having common subject-matter, and yet John's Gospel, if grouped according to time, would stand with his three epistles and the Apocalypse, as the latest writings of the New Testament. In like manner the apostolic Epistles should be studied in groups according to the time of their composition. Only in this [88] way can we have before our minds the state of society which was before the minds of the

writers, and possess the key to the vivid appreciation of these writings which these circumstances alone can furnish.

The study of the Scriptures by topics is the third method which I have named. While prosecuting the methods already mentioned, a general knowledge of leading topics will have been obtained; but the preacher should never be satisfied with a general knowledge of any topic treated in the Bible. Detached pieces of information are never satisfying, and they are very likely to prove misleading. Complete, systematic and exact information is what our calling demands, and this we must as soon as possible acquire.

I know of no method by which such a knowledge of topics can be acquired less laborious than the following: First, by means of your recollection from former readings, and by use of your Concordance, gather up all the passages which treat of the subject in hand, or which throw any light upon it. Second, classify these passages according to the different branches of the subject with which they are connected. The branches of the subject are often known in a general way before the investigation begins. They have come into notice by inquiries of your own mind, or they have been made familiar by religious controversy. When the divisions thus suggested are but a part, the passages themselves will suggest the remainder, so that there will seldom appear any difficulty in completely classifying the collected passages and obtaining exhaustive subdivisions of the topic. The next step [89] is to arrange the thoughts and facts under each branch of the subject in some natural order of sequence, and thus obtain a systematic view of it as it stands in the Scriptures. Finally, the parts must be studied with reference to one another and the whole; and the whole must be studied with reference to all its parts. When this is done you are prepared, and not till then, to write or speak on the subject or any of its parts with the assurance of one who understands fully what he proposes to say.

This is a laborious process. It is one which only the few have the industry to pursue; but the few who do pursue it are the masters in Israel, they are the teachers of teachers; while those who lack this industry must remain contented with very imperfect knowledge, and must obtain their knowledge in the main at second-hand. I suppose myself to be addressing men who wish to rank with the former of these two classes. It may be well to add, however, that a young preacher, in the beginning of his ministry must necessarily discuss some subject before he can have had time and opportunity for this exhaustive study; but all such should remember that this necessity is one of the disabilities of inexperience which must be put away as soon as possible.

In the last place, I am to speak of studying the Scriptures devotionally. The preacher who has not a devotional spirit, lacks the chief elements of power with the people both in the pulpit and out of it. He is utterly incapable of cultivating a devotional spirit in his hearers; and without this the entire service of the [90] church becomes an empty form. No man who is to lead the people in the way of life can afford to neglect this element of the Christian character, this source of religious enjoyment, this element of pulpit power. Apart from frequent prayer and much meditation, there is no way to cultivate this spirit except by the thoughtful reading of those portions of Scripture which are especially designed to awaken devotional sentiments. The preacher, therefore, should study these portions a great deal. They should be in his hand every day.

When we speak of devotional parts of the Scriptures, the mind turns at once to the book of Psalms; for in it are collected the richest poetic effusions of pious hearts throughout the period of Jewish inspiration, from Moses to the poets of Babylonian captivity. But only a certain portion of these is well adapted to the

cultivation of devotion. Some of them are descriptive, some didactic, and a few are vindictive, giving utterance to that sentiment of the Mosaic law which allowed the demand of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. By frequent reading of all the Psalms, the preacher will make himself acquainted with those which contain pure devotional feeling according to the Christian standard, and these should be his sources of inspiration.

But besides the Psalms, there are many passages in Job, in Ecclesiastes, in Proverbs, in the prophets, and even in the historical books of the Old Testament, the study of which lifts up the soul to the loftiest sentiments, while in the New Testament, which contains not a single book of poetry, there are passages in the Gospel, [91] in Acts, in the Epistles, and in the Apocalypse, fully equal to the sublimest poetry for filling the soul with every holy emotion. The preacher, while studying the Scriptures historically, by books and by topics, will have found all these passages. He should mark them as he discovers them, and should subsequently revert to them, for devotional reading until both their contents and their places in the book became familiar to him.

In order to the best effect upon our hearts, our devotional study should not consist in a mere dreamy reading of the parts referred to; for in this way the impression made is likely to be shallow and transitory. We should study these passages exegetically, searching into the significance of every figure employed, and trying to paint before imagination's eye every image projected by the writer. If we read, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," we do not feel full force of the metaphor until we learn all about the work of a Palestine shepherd, as it is alluded to throughout this Psalm, and as it is literally described by Jesus in the tenth chapter of John. So of all the metaphors, tropes and historical allusions throughout the poetry of the Bible.

But the best effects of devotional study will still lie beyond our reach, if we do not commit many of these inspiring passages to memory, so that we can meditate upon them in the night watches, call them up amid our labors and our journeyings, and make them subjects of conversation when the Bible is not at hand. It is in this way that the word of God is to dwell in us richly [92] in all wisdom. If you will inquire you will find it almost universally true of men and women eminent for piety, that their Memories were vast storehouses for the most precious portions of God's Holy Book.

As a kind of concluding note I must append to this part of my lecture the remark, that in all of our study of the Scriptures we must constantly consult the original if we can, and that we must by all means use the best version. The Canterbury revision of the New Testament should now totally supplant the King James version, not only because it is a great improvement as a version, but because it is the only representative in English of the corrected Greek text. A man is not safe in venturing upon the exegesis of a single passage by the aid of the old version until he shall have compared it carefully with the new; and rather than be continually making those comparisons, it is better to at once adopt the new into exclusive use.

II.

STUDY OF OTHER BOOKS.

From this brief treatment of the study of the Scriptures, we pass to the study of other books, and first to the study of Commentaries. This is really but another method of studying the Scriptures, yet it may properly received separate treatment.

There is a well known prejudice against the use of Commentaries, but it is confined to a small and decreasing number of persons. The man who attempts to gain a knowledge of the Bible by his [93] own unaided powers, while the aid furnished by a multitude of learned and devout predecessors is at hand, seems to declare himself the equal in exegetical power of all have who gone before him. In no other department of human study do we reject the aid of our fellow-students; why should we reject it in this?

Good Commentaries render us important service in many ways. First they serve as a guard against blunders. Among the most egregious blunders in the interpretation of Scripture are those committed by men of inferior learning or judgment who interpret the Scriptures without aid. The use of a judicious Commentary guards us against many blunders of this kind, and it corrects many a mistake into which we fall before the Commentary is consulted. In the second place, it is a ready source of information. Multitudes of facts and references throwing floods of light upon important passages have been collected by the research of commentators, and furnished to our hand, which would otherwise be beyond our reach, or, if we reach them at all, it would be after years of toil and the reading of thousands of pages. No man can afford to decline the use of these gathered treasures. True it would strengthen his powers to gather them for himself, but he may strengthen his powers much more rapidly by gathering up these, and then by the aid of these, going out to search for others. The speculator who wishes to make millions never rejects the few thousands already within his grasp, but he uses the thousands as the means of getting the millions. In the third place, the use of Commentaries awakens thought. Every [94] one that is worth consulting presents the subject in some new phase: it presents something different from and often inconsistent with our own previously formed conceptions; and it compels us to think again over the whole ground. Such recasting of thought on a subject is necessary to intelligent confidence in our final conclusions. In the last place, Commentaries, with all the errors which may be properly charged against them, do in the main give us the right interpretation of obscure passages, and the right application of those which are not obscure. If we follow them implicitly we are but seldom led astray, and if we find in them only a confirmation of our own conclusions this gives us strength and gratification.

While I insist, however, upon the value of Commentaries, I would also insist upon a judicious use of them. When about to study a passage of Scripture, never consult the Commentary first. If you do you are likely to accept the author's views, whether right or wrong, and your mind will be biased in the subsequent study of the text itself. First study the text until its words and sentences are distinctly apprehended; until all that is clear in it is understood; until its difficulties are discovered; and until your own mind has grappled with these difficulties more or less successfully. You are then prepared to consult the Commentary. As you read it you know of what it treats; you can judge of the correctness of its statements; you can see where it touches the difficulties; and you can accept or reject the explanations which it gives with an intelligent judgment. [95]

I would suggest as another precaution in regard to Commentaries, that the young preacher take pains, as soon as practicable, to procure two or more on every portion of Scripture which he studies, lest he become a blind follower of a single, guide, who, in some places, is almost certain to be a blind guide. In making selections, always choose from the more recent rather than from the older works. In all departments of literature immense advances are being made on the knowledge and methods of former times, and in no department are they more rapid than in the interpretation and illustration of the Bible.

The best commentaries in English on the whole Bible are Lange's, and the Bible Commentary, sometimes called the Speaker's Commentary, because the preparation of it was first proposed by the Speaker of the House of Commons. Commentaries on the New Testament, and on special portions of it, are very

numerous, and many of them are excellent; but Ellicott's works contain the finest specimens of grammatical exegesis, and Lightfoot's the finest in the way of profound historical research.

There are some other Biblical works, the study of which is scarcely less important than that of Commentaries. Of these I will mention a few, and foremost among them all, Smith's Bible Dictionary. This great work might be regarded as a commentary on the whole Bible arranged in the order of subjects and not in that of books, chapters, and verses. It contains the cream of all the knowledge possessed by the most cultivated minds in Great Britain, on all Bible themes, including all [96] places and persons mentioned therein. Only in the geography of Palestine, I believe, have more recent investigations superseded it in important particulars.

Next to this in value I would place the Life and Epistles of Paul, by Conybeare & Howson. It is scarcely saying too much of this work to assert that to the man who has not studied it, it offers a new revelation on Acts of Apostles and the Epistles of Paul. As a companion to the Old Testament, Rawlinson's History of the Seven Ancient Monarchies is of almost equal value. It supersedes all other ancient histories, and makes full use of the historical materials derived from the disinterred libraries of the ancient world. There has recently appeared in English a series of works covering in part the same ground with the Life and Epistles of Paul just mentioned, but reaching backward and forward of it in point of time, with which every preacher should become familiar. The Life of Jesus, by Strauss, followed by Bauer's Life of Paul, and his Church History of the first three centuries, and these followed in France by the Jesus, the Paul, and the Apostles, of Ernest Renan, opened a new era in infidel literature, one in which a large number of eminent men have undertaken the entire reconstruction of New Testament history, with all that is miraculous left out. These efforts have called forth two works in France, now found in an English dress, and three in Great Britain, which are among the best of all modern contributions to Biblical literature. They are Pressense's Life of Jesus, and his Early Years of Christianity; and Canon Farrar's Life of Jesus, His Life and Epistles [97] of Paul, and his Early Days of Christianity. These works, without taking the form of direct replies to the works of Strauss, Bauer, and Renan, are written from the new point of view suggested by those works, and they contain a complete vindication of the historical truthfulness of the New Testament. I sincerely regret, in regard to the profound and eloquent works of Canon Farrar, that I am constrained to modify my commendation of them by cautioning the reader against his belief in a post mortem gospel, and his inadequate conceptions of inspiration.

In addition to Biblical works of the kind just mentioned, the preacher should also study works on the Evidences of Christianity. It is no reproach to a man of little education and poor opportunities for study, that he believes in the divine authority of the Bible, not because he has made a special study of its evidences, but because he has been educated to this belief. The value of faith is determined, not by the source whence it is obtained, but by the effect which it has on our lives. Of the preacher, however, more than to his is rightly expected. He should know for his own sake, and in order that he may teach it to others and defend it when attacked, the line of evidence which supports our faith.

The exhaustive study of evidences is a lifetime work. The books on the subject are numbered by the hundred. Some of the questions involved are exceedingly intricate, requiring much learning and research for their solution; new questions are constantly arising, and the line of defence, as a consequence, is ever [98] changing. Only the few who are possessed of learning, leisure, and libraries, can explore the entire field. But there is, and from the nature of the case there must be, a fixed line of positive evidence on which the faith has always rested, and on which it must continue to rest to the end of time. With this every preacher should endeavor to make himself familiar; and he will find that, in the main, it is simple and very

direct.

It is better, when practicable, to begin the investigation of questions in dispute with some fact admitted by all parties, so that all may start from common ground. This rule would suggest as the very first question in a course of study in Evidences, the inquiry whether the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures, which we now have in hand, as all parties to the controversy know, have been so preserved from the date of their composition as to be substantially the same that they were originally. If it cannot be made to appear that they are, the investigation need not go any farther; for what is the use of spending time to prove the divine origin of an ancient book if no reliable copy of it has been preserved to us? The study, then, of the state of the Greek and Hebrew text, by the aid of works on Biblical Criticism, is the first task before the student of Evidences. But though first in logical order, it is the last in the order of actual development. Biblical Criticism cannot yet be called a completed science; for, while it has almost completed its task on the New Testament, it has done comparatively little on the Old. Still, enough has been done to assure the student that in the whole New Testament, with well defined [99] exceptions of brief passages and single words on which we can place our fingers, we have the very words and syllables which were penned by the inspired writers. The number of those yet doubtful is rapidly diminishing under the hands of the critics, and none of them leaves doubtful any matter of doctrine or duty. The best works to study on this subject, taken in the order in which I name them, are the History of the Printed Text by Tregelles, Scrivener's Introduction to the Critical Study of the New Testament, and the Appendix to Westcott & Hort's edition of the Greek Testament.

Having satisfied ourselves that the New Testament books have come down to us without material change, we must next inquire when and by whom these books were written. Were they written by the authors to whom they are commonly accredited, or are they spurious compositions of a later date? It is idle to inquire into the inspiration of the authors until we know who the authors were. On this subject, commonly known under the title of the Canon of the New Testament, the preacher will find much valuable information in the introductions to the various books in his Commentaries, and he will find similar information in his Bible Dictionary. After mastering these he is prepared to study appreciatively Westcott's work on the Canon, the most masterly work on the subject now extant in the English language. He will find, also, nearer home, in Prof. Fisher's Supernatural Origin of the Bible, and Ezra Abbott's small work on the Genuineness of the Gospel of John, some special arguments of very great value. [100]

Having traced the New Testament books to their reputed authors, we next inquire what evidence these books furnish, apart from their claim to inspiration, in favor of the divinity of Christ. This depends upon their authenticity. If their statements in matters of fact are reliable, including what they say of the miraculous, then, whatever may be the qualifications of the writers in other particulars, the claims of our Redeemer are established, and the Christian religion is proved to be of divine origin and authority. This question is treated here and there, in connection with particular passages, throughout all the good Commentaries, and there are several most excellent works devoted entirely to its discussion. Of these I may mention, as among the most valuable, Blunt's Coincidences, Paley's *Horae Paulinae*, and Rawlinson's Historical Evidences.

But when we have proved that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, our task is not yet completed. However true the claims of Jesus, and however truly and authoritatively he spoke, unless we have a reliable account of his teaching, we know not how to avail ourselves of the blessings which it offered to the world. Moreover, a very large part of the teaching found in the New Testament came not from him, but from the pens of his disciples, and unless they possessed some qualification for speaking with authority in matters spiritual and eternal, we are thrown back at last upon our own fallible judgment to

decide what is right and true. This makes it necessary that we next inquire whether or not these writers were inspired, and to what extent their inspiration guarded them [101] against error. If when writing they were miraculously inspired of God, then all that they have written is infallibly true; if not, then every man is left to judge for himself when they speak the truth and when they do not.

While almost any work on the general subject of evidences that you may take up, and every valuable Commentary, contains proofs of the inspiration of New Testament writers, and while inspiration of some kind is conceded to them even by many extreme rationalists, I am not able to name a work which, in my judgment, contains a thoroughly satisfactory discussion of the nature and extent of inspiration. It is purely a Biblical question, to be determined by statements of the Scriptures themselves. As a brief outline of a course of study on the subject, I recommend that we inquire first of all, what Jesus promised his disciples in the way of inspiration. Examine these promises with the utmost care, so as to determine with the greatest possible precision what they mean. Secondly, let us examine with equal care what the Apostles claim to have realized in fulfilment of these promises. Thirdly, consider the bearing of all facts recorded which tend in any way to modify the promises and the statements concerning their fulfilment, and let these have due weight in forming our final conclusions. In this way alone, it seems to me, can an adequate theory of inspiration be evolved, and in this way every man of fair scholarship and sound judgment can safely prosecute the inquiry. I commend it to my brethren in the ministry as one of the most [102] important inquiries which can in this age engage their attention. There is no other question on which the minds of preachers are now more unsettled, and there is none on which it is more important that we have settled convictions. If a man fall into doubt concerning the inspiration of the sacred writers, though his faith may appear to live, it is dead--it is rotten at the core.

At the close of this series of inquiries, the student of evidences is ready to gather up and appreciate a multitude of collateral and of independent arguments which are scattered through the books on the subject, and he is also ready to enter upon the consideration of all objections and of all arguments on the other side which he shall not have encountered already. In regard to the latter, I have a suggestion to submit, which may be dignified by the title of a rule to govern our readings in evidences. Never read an attack on the Bible at a given point until the Bible at the point of attack is understood, and its evidences known. Of course, you may stumble upon some attack, or you may look into a work, or listen to a lecture, for the purpose of ascertaining what attack is made. But when a book is within your reach which you know contains an attack on a particular part of the Bible or on a particular line of its evidence, never read that book until you have made yourself acquainted with that which it attacks. This is but a maxim of common sense, and its observance is necessary to fairness. It is enforced in courts of justice and in all properly conducted discussions. The evidence which the plaintiff [103] can furnish in support of his claims is always heard before that of the defendant who attacks his claim; and in criminal cases, the only reason why the accuser is heard first, is because he claims that a crime has been committed by the defendant, and the evidence in support of his claim must be first heard. In public discussions, no one hears the negative until after he has heard the affirmative. If you listen to unfriendly representations of a person before you are acquainted with him, you may be prejudiced against one whom you would otherwise highly esteem; and if you hear unfavorable statements concerning a book which you have never read, you can scarcely do justice to it when you read it. So it is with the Bible. Thousands of unbelievers owe their unbelief to the fact that they have listened to the negative in the discussion concerning its claims, before they have heard and understood the affirmative. No grosser injustice could they have perpetrated against their own minds or the Bible.

Before leaving this general division of my subject, I must add a suggestion in regard to the reading of general literature. It has been truly said that there is no department of knowledge which the preacher cannot make subservient to his high calling; yet there is a limit to the possibilities of acquisition, and he who limits his efforts at acquisition to that which will do him the best service is the one who studies most wisely. As a rule, an earnest preacher's knowledge of general literature is confined chiefly to what he acquires before he enters fully upon his life work; for after this, literature belonging to his special department is so [104] urgent in its demands and so enormous in quantity, that if he does it justice it will absorb all of his time. Still, there are hours of relaxation in which a brief excursion into neighboring fields is refreshing to the student and from it he will usually bring back some valuable spoils.

III.

SPECIAL PREPARATION FOR THE PULPIT.

On the subject of special preparation I must speak very briefly. As I could not cover the entire ground without giving a synopsis of some work on Homiletics, I will only attempt a few suggestions on points which need, I think, to be emphasized.

First of all, I ask, what is the purpose of a sermon? Its structure, the material which enters into it, and the special study which precedes it, will all be determined by its purpose. It is feared that some sermons are prepared and delivered for the purpose of making a reputation. In all such the apostolic rule is reversed, and the preacher preaches himself, not the Lord Jesus. Other sermons have in view, as their chief aim, the improvement of the preacher as a public speaker. This also is a selfish end, and a prostitution of the noblest office ever committed by God to man. A better class of sermons are intended merely to impart instruction. These, while aimed in the right direction, fall short of the proper aim of a sermon. This aim, if we judge by all of the apostolic sermons, and by all that is said in the New Testament about preaching, is to bring about some change for the better in the life of [105] the hearer. To this end instruction is but tributary, and for this reason it holds a subordinate place. No sermon is effective without instruction, nor is it effective without exhortation. We teach that we may have a basis for exhortation, and we exhort that we may move to proper action. The last is the supreme purpose to which all else is to be carefully subordinated.

If this view is correct, then the very first step in the special preparation of a sermon, is to select the special change for the better at which it shall aim. This determined, the subject is determined, and often the passage of Scripture which contains the subject. Sometimes, it is true, a certain subject suggests a certain end to be attained by a sermon, and often a passage of Scripture on which the mind is dwelling suggests the subject of a sermon and its aim. But in these cases it is still the practical aim in view which settles the mind upon the choice of that particular passage and that particular subject.

When the special aim of the sermon has been fixed, and the subject or the particular Scripture passage to be employed has been selected, the next step is to study the selected passage until the author's real thought is ascertained. This and this only should be presented as the teaching of the passage. To wrest the word of God for an evil purpose is one of the greatest of sins. To wrest it for a good purpose, though not so bad, is still a sin, and it is a sin quite common in the pulpit. It is to do evil that good may come. It is deceptive, because it has the appearance of doing what is not done, and it leaves on the minds of many hearers a [106] permanent misconception of the passage which is misconstrued. If a text properly construed, whether it be your principal text, or others employed in the progress of the sermon, does not

serve your purpose, find others that do, and if you can find none that do, then conclude either that your purpose is unscriptural, or that you are not yet sufficiently acquainted with the Bible to speak with that purpose in view.

It is also highly important that when the preacher has selected his subject, he make himself thoroughly acquainted with it before speaking on it. Otherwise he is in danger of taking positions which fuller information would require him to modify or abandon. Multitudes of the blunders and errors which are constantly disfiguring pulpit efforts and which often make them sources of greater evil than good, result from neglecting this rule. The rule requires us to gather before us all the passages of Scripture which treat of the special subject in hand, to study every one with reference to the particular light which it throws upon the whole subject, and when we have made our selection to treat it in the light shed upon it by all the other passages. The careful observance of this rule will save the preacher from many a blunder and will prove to him a very fruitful source of rich and solid material out of which to construct subsequent sermons.

There are two parts of the sermon always requiring very careful attention, which are very commonly neglected. I mean the introduction and the conclusion. A good introduction, fixing the attention and winning the favor of an audience, gives [107] the preacher a vantage ground at the outset and wins half the battle before the real struggle begins. It should never be left to the spur of the moment, but it should be carefully studied as an outgrowth of the sermon; for though, like a preface to a book, it comes first to others it often comes last to yourself.

Good introductions are more common than good conclusions. How often we have heard sermons which moved on steadily and impressively until near the close, and then struggled as if sinking in the mire. We could see just how far the preacher had made careful preparation, and as soon as he passed that limit we could see that he began to flounder. Perhaps we have been that preacher (who of us has not?) and can remember how we beat about for a landing place and could not find it,--how we felt every moment that our sermon was being whittled down to the little end of nothing, though we struggled with might and main to give it a better ending. All this is the result of defective preparation. We stopped preparing before we got through and as a consequence we got through the sermon before we quit speaking. To avoid this disaster, which sometimes sends a man home, feeling as if he never had preached well and never could, we must be careful to fix upon a conclusion and to prepare it thoroughly.

This should be done also for two other reasons. First, it is the beginning and the end of the sermon which are most distinctly remembered by the average hearer. When he has forgotten everything else that was said, he remembers these. Second, it gives [108] greater power and ease to the preacher himself all through the sermon. His conclusion, if a good one, contains in the concentrated form of earnest appeal, the practical aim of the entire discourse. Everything he says is aimed at it, and he approaches it at every step. He knows his landing place and he feels increasing strength as he advances toward it. It animates him from the beginning and it lifts him high when he reaches it. His hearers must be hard of heart if he does not lift them with him.

In all that I have said on the subject of special preparation, I refer to preparation for preaching, not for writing. If a man, after thus preparing to preach a sermon concludes to commit it to writing, either before or after delivering it, he does well, provided he does so not for the purpose of reading it to an audience, or of printing it, or of committing it to memory and reciting it. There is a great difference between preaching and reciting a memorized sermon. The former is a living thing, the latter is a machine. There is a still greater difference between preaching and reading a sermon. When the reading is real reading, as when one

reads a book, it is a tame affair in the pulpit. When it is not real reading, but a kind of make-believe in which the speaker half reads, half recites and tries to convince the audience by gesticulating and posturing, and hiding his manuscript, that he is preaching, the performance is a farce, and the people would laugh it out of countenance were it not for the solemn service with which it is connected. [109]

IV.

SYSTEM IN STUDY.

There are some preachers who read a great deal and do some studying, but never reach proportionate attainments because of a want of system. There are many others, who for the same reason never find time for much reading or study, and who consequently make but little growth. The only way to accomplish much in this bustling and distracting world, whatever be our line of work, is to work in a systematic way--to have a time for everything, and to do everything in its time.

Preachers who are moving about from church to church, and from house to house engaged in protracted meetings or missionary work, are apt to imagine that they have no time for study. But it is entirely practicable for them to spend some hours almost every day at a particular time of day in hard study, if they will. It requires only a little resolution and a polite apology to the friends who would otherwise expect your company, and who would perhaps be glad at times to be rid of entertaining you.

System in study requires much more than the mere appropriation of regular hours to study. It requires the steady prosecution of selected lines of study, and the proper distribution of our time between these. It is not well to give our whole time for any considerable period to one line of study; nor must we divide it between too many. The study of the Scriptures should [110] occupy a fixed part of every day. If one devotes but a single hour every day to the study of the Scriptures historically, or by books, or topically, and shall compute how much this will amount to in a year, he will be astonished at the result. In the course of a lifetime it would make him intimately acquainted with every part of the Bible. And besides the study for mere knowledge, he should give another part of every day to devotional study. Should a man take time to only commit to memory a single verse of a Psalm and meditate upon it every day, in the course of a year he would commit at least twenty Psalms, and he would have all of them in about seven years. I mention these small figures, not because a preacher should be content with them, but to show by the results of a little systematic study that more can be accomplished than those who lack system are apt to imagine.

As preaching is the preacher's business, the special study of sermons should of course occupy just so much of his time as is necessary to the very best preaching of which he is capable. It cannot occupy all of his time, because the general lines of study which we have marked out are necessary for the accumulation of material on which to expend the special study of sermons; but the most pressing demand upon the preacher's time, and the demand which must at all hazards be met, is that which is made by the preparation of sermons.

Give me a man of ordinary talents and earnest piety, who steadily and perseveringly through life pursues such a system of study as I have marked out, and I [111] will show you a preacher who will always be sought after by churches that have him not; who will never leave a community except against its protest; who will count his converts by the thousands, if he live long; who will count in still larger numbers the struggling souls whom he shall have helped on their heavenward way, and who will finally bring an abundance of sheaves into the eternal granary.

DISCUSSION ON J. W. M'GARVEY'S LECTURES.

A. Proctor: I have no reflections to pass on the lecturer. I have known him for years as a studious, painstaking man, and he has shown it to-day by the amount of good advice he has gathered together in these lectures. As for myself, I had not the opportunity in my young days to profit by such information. I seem to be an exception to all rules, and yet I am no example to the younger preachers. I have too many defects. I find, however, that I can get my sermons best by keeping near to Christ and feeling the beating of His mighty heart. I do not disparage the books of the Bible nor the "Evidences"--I respect them. I have sat at the feet of these sacred bards and enjoyed it. But I do not find all the time I desire for this now, I find I have to get a little evidence here and a little there as I can pick it up, and the whole earth is full of proofs of God. The method of science is exact and full, and young men should avail themselves of it if possible. But there are other things to study. [112] This world is a world of truth and it is God's truth. Science is a grand conception and truth science is God's Christianity. Christianity needs science, and science needs Christianity. Each must work for the other. Take out the work of educating and transfiguring men and what can science do? It would be wholly gymnastic, giving a man training, but no impulses of life. I am looking on with interest at the battle between science and Christianity and I want the conclusion at which we shall arrive, to be a victory for God. In order to do this our young men must study all these things as well as the Bible. You must know the things well you would meet if you are to overcome it.

Isaac Errett:--There are two or three things of importance to us, and to Bro. McGarvey, that I will call attention to, so that, as the lecturer himself suggested, he may avail himself of them in his lectures at Fort Scott, Kansas. Bro. McGarvey used the term "preaching" without bringing out the thought of "teaching." This is work, men must engage in, in their regular pastoral line. We have had suggestions given us connecting heart-power. No man who preaches two sermons can have any time for generating heart-power. Crowded with pastoral duties all week, one can scarce do himself justice in preparing his sermons. A man, to grow and be strong must get out and preach his sermons five hundred times, and so fertilize his thought and heart. It is unjust to saddle young men onto congregations. The open field is their place. This is where power resides. Walter Scott preached a sermon fifty times before he could satisfy himself. A sermon [113] is not the inspiration or rush of a moment. It comes by degrees, and by processes of time.

Again, is to adopting rules. Bro. McGarvey gave us some excellent hints in this direction. Still we must adopt all rules with this understanding: that some may not fit us exactly. I depended on what Alexander Campbell told me, and came near making a failure of myself. He advised me never to write my sermons; but I found I had to or I could not think accurately. When I attempted to preach them without writing them out first, I found I treated them in a very crude way and I had to go over all the ground again. I have piles of sermons I never preached, but I am satisfied the writing of them helped me to where I am now.

Again, Bro. McGarvey with all his excellent thought concerning various books in the Bible said nothing about the connection between the Old and New Scriptures. Prideaux Connection used to do very well years ago, but such has been the advance made in various departments of Biblical knowledge that it will not serve the purpose now. I know of none I can recommend that meets all demands.

As to the making of sermons I think there are a great improvements still to be made. Young men must avoid the habit of selecting a text and essaying around and about it as Spurgeon does. Men simmer over

a text, frequently, no one knowing what they intend when they begin their sermons, nor when they conclude it. I have myself been pressed into three services daily, and find in such cases I had to adopt some strategy by [114] which I would relieve myself of an excess of study. I brought my congregation together in the afternoon, giving them a short lecture on some section of Scripture and questioning them upon it. Sometimes an essay or two of five minutes length was read, or a word of instruction or exhortation offered by the young men. The people came to this service, Bible in hand, reading or inquiring concerning some difficult passages. From two years' experiment in this direction I found I could make more good preachers than they did at the colleges. I started the men that ought to go to the schools and had them out everywhere with Bible in hand holding prayer-meetings from house to house.

J. A. Dearborn: I have great confidence in Bro. Errett's views as to the course a young man should pursue after being thoroughly prepared by Bro. McGarvey. No greater calamity can befall young men than to take them right out of school and settle them down with old congregations. If you want to diminish a young man to little or nothing this is the plan. If you want to make a man of him take him out of college, put him on a horse and send him over the prairies or all through the mountain country. Young men mustn't be always seeking easy places where they can preach two nice little sermons on Sunday. This is not a practical way to develop our young men. Instead of searching round for prominent places let them do good work in the field and these prominent places will be ready for them when they are prepared to take them. [115]

W. S. Priest: I have listened with deep interest to what has been said, but what are you going to do when a struggling church in a city cannot pay large salaries to experienced men. Are you going to let them starve out and die? Supposing a church is not able to pay Bro. Haley or Bro. Jones a thousand or twelve hundred dollars--a sum little enough to be sure for a man who has a family to support--but can raise some young man three or four hundred dollars, what is to be done in this case?

Isaac Errett: Do the best you can. We are considering the matter ideally and I am glad this practical phase has come up. This whole preaching business is a mystery to me. As I get older I conclude I know little if anything about it. One man will go before a congregation with a studied and intelligent sermon, and you would think such intellectuality as he displays would certainly draw immense crowds. Count the people present and very likely he has but a corporal's guard. The other, has nothing but spoon-victuals and he serves this out in a very thin way but you cannot get house-room to hold his hearers. Frequently our own preachers, when at an age from which it is unreasonable to look for much, far excel others of us who have been reading and thinking half a life time.

J. W. M'GARVEY'S REJOINDER.

I have no reply to make. I am glad of all the suggestions and hope to profit by them. I am especially glad to hear Bro. Priest's remarks. Young men get [116] into exigencies as well as old men. They go to college for a year or two, get out of money and have to go to work. Sometimes a good man observes merit in the student and aids him, but this is not often done. The young preacher is bound to go where money is, in such cases, whether it suits his inclination to do so or not. I know no rules in such cases. It is best that he should not bid for mere wealth for this will corrupt him. Let him go out it possible as these brethren advise. Yet, who wants a young student, just from college, to hold them a protracted meeting? If he gets work at all it is often because of the sympathy churches have for him. The tug of war is upon him until he obtains some age and experience, let him do what he will. He must do the best he can and this is all that can be required of him. [117]

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jw-mcgarvey/preachers-methods/>

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