

## CHAPTER II.

THE THEME AND MATERIAL OF THE SERMON.-  
THE DETERMINATION OF THE THEME.

By the theme is meant the subject or topic of a sermon stated as a proposition. It is this propositional form which makes it differ from the mere title of the discourse.

The terms subject and theme are often used interchangeably-but properly the subject or title is expressed in a single word or phrase, whilst the theme is a concise statement of what we propose to do with the topic or text announced. Thus on John xiv: 23, the title of the sermon would be, "Love to Christ," but the theme should be, "Obedience to Christ is the best proof of our love to Him." On Provo xxii: 6, the title would be, "The children of the Church," but the theme "The duty of the Church to educate and train her children." On Rom. v: 1, the subject is Justification, but the theme "Faith in Christ is the only ground of our justification with God."

Sometimes the text itself is expressed in such form and language as to need no further proposition or theme, *e.g.*, Matt. v : 8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Or Matt. ix : 6, "The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins." These need no clearer statement.

So too the title or topic of the sermon may

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be sufficiently comprehensive and need no separate theme. On Gal. v : 6, "Faith which worketh by love;" if the title is "The three elements in Christian life," it will be sufficient. So if on Matt. xxi : 28, the title of the sermon is "Laboring in God's vineyard;" or on Rom. vii: 12, "The excellence of God's law," no separate theme is necessary.

## USE AND ADVANTAGES OF THE THEME.

The **theme** is a much more prominent feature of the sermon among German divines than among English. In English discourses the division generally is based on the text itself, but in German it is based on the particular theme drawn from the text. One reason for this is the custom among Germans to take the Gospel for the day as the text much more frequently than English preachers do. When the same text is used on the same Sundays for a series of years the inventive faculties of the preacher are taxed to the utmost to discover a new theme or line of thought with which to interest as well as edify his hearers. Hence the theme assumes an importance and occupies a prominence in German homiletics, almost unknown in English.

The homiletical skill of Reinhard, the court-preacher at Dresden a hundred years ago, appears chiefly in the variety and richness of his themes drawn from the same text, as he was required by law to confine himself to the Gospels selected for each Sunday. On the Gospel for the seventh Sunday after Trinity

REINHARD'S THEMES.

(Mark viii: 1-9), the miracle of feeding the four thousand, he has the following themes:

"God can and will bring much out of little."

"The virtue of contentment." (Their food was very simple.)

"The manner in which God supplies our daily bread is wonderful."

"How we should receive and give in times of scarcity."

"Why Christ repeatedly led his hearers to solitary places."

"The silent influence of goodness." (They remained three days with Him.)

"Our condition would be miserable if God did not amend the faults into which our imprudence leads us." (They came without supplies.)

"The remarkable connection God has established between our religious improvement and the supply of our daily wants."

"Time judiciously expended in religious exercises promotes even our temporal interests."

..The remarkable fact that the disciples never asked Christ to perform miracles."

But even among German preachers the theme no longer has the prominence it formerly had. The late Dr. Mann in his lectures on homiletics gave this among other rules: "Do not trouble yourself much about the thema, In hunting after a thema many a man lost the real nerve of the text. Elucidate and apply your text practically; perhaps all at once a thema will be found. If not, no matter-if only justice is done to the text, and through it to the souls of the hearers." Nevertheless, it

will aid not only the preacher in his preparation and delivery, but the people in understanding and remembering the sermon, if a definite purpose or line of thought is decided upon and announced before the discussion begins.

There should be such definite purpose in every sermon, and the congregation should know what it is-and to express this is the use and purpose of the theme. It is the trunk of the tree of which the text is the root, and the divisions are the branches. It extends through the entire sermon, and gives it unity and strength.

In textual sermons a theme is less important than in topical, because in textual sermons the object is to explain, illustrate, and apply the text in all its parts, whilst in topical sermons there is but one subject, and it is important to state our purpose or mode of treatment in a distinct proposition or theme.

The theme need not always be formally announced. Where the sermon is a discussion of a particular topic, the theme of course should be stated before the discussion begins. But sometimes it is better to let the theme, like the divisions, gradually unfold itself as the sermon progresses. This is especially the case where the announcement of the theme would arouse prejudice or antagonism in the minds of the hearers.

#### RULES CONCERNING THEMES.

1. The theme must be drawn legitimately from the text. There would be no use in taking a text if this rule is disregarded. The

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theme must grow out of the text, and not merely be placed beside it or ignore it.

2. It should include all the chief points of the sermon. It need not express the divisions in so many words, but should be comprehensive enough to cover the entire discussion. Sometimes the division may aptly express the theme, "S- "The Bible: The Basis, the Bond, and the Bulwark of the Church."

3. The theme may take a variety of form and be either didactic, propositional, or interrogatory.

[E.g. On John xvi: 23-4, the form of the theme may be

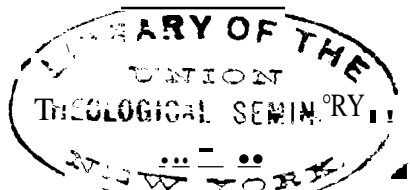
(a.) *Didactic.*-Our prayers must be offered in Jesus' name.

(b.) *Propositional.*-The name of Jesus is essential to the efficacy of prayer.

(c.) *Interrogatory.*-Why should we pray in Jesus's name? ]

4. The theme should be expressed in clear and concise language, in a single sentence.

5. Themes should be stated in a way to arouse interest. While careful to avoid arousing antagonism, equal care should be used to make the theme attract attention to the sermon. There is an art in presenting old and familiar subjects in a new form. Drummond gained many readers of his essay on Charity by giving it the title, "The Greatest Thing in the World." Novelty should not be attempted at the sacrifice of propriety, but there is a legitimate way of putting our themes so as to excite interest as soon as announced. Great care, however, must be exercised to avoid



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what is merely sensational, or would seem irreverent and offensive to pious minds.

6. Do not attempt or propose too much in your theme. It is not wise to arouse an interest by your theme which your sermon will not satisfy. Do not layout a larger piece of ground than you are able to build on. Do not propose to do what you have neither the time nor the ability to accomplish.

## GATHERING THE MATERIAL.

There are **five sources** from which proper material for sermons may be obtained..

1. **The Holy Scriptures.** Too often the Bible is used only as a book for texts, and when these are chosen it is laid aside. The true evangelical preacher, however, seeks in it the best arguments and illustrations for the sermon. He studies its very language and modes of expression, so that as far as possible he may clothe his thoughts in the words of Scripture. It is the chief storehouse from which we get the material of which sermons are made. Familiarity with and correct knowledge of the Bible in all its various parts of prophecy, history, and doctrine is indispensable. No man can be a successful preacher of the Word who is deficient in his knowledge of that Word or of what it contains.

There are three special uses of Scripture in gathering material for sermons:

(a.) **Study the text in its original language.** Exegesis is the basis of homiletics as well as of dogmatics, and your proficiency in this will be of great value. The preacher who

is content with the common version or translation of the Scriptures will miss many most interesting suggestions of the original, and sometimes fail altogether in apprehending the true meaning of the text. Avoid criticising the received version in your sermon, but bring out the fulness of the meaning of your text. Even if no new points are discovered, the study of the text in its original language develops the mind and gives a scholarly flavor to any sermon.

This examination of the original should not be confined to the text selected, but extend to the entire section or paragraph to which it belongs. A critical examination of the context will sometimes put texts in a new light and give them a different meaning from our previous understanding of them, and we are bound to interpret God's Word correctly according to its true meaning, and not according to our fancy or convenience.

(b.) Examine the text in all versions and translations accessible. The Septuagint of the Old Testament, the Latin or Vulgate of St. Jerome, and Luther's German Version of the Bible demand special attention. The Revised Version of the English translation will repay examination, as will any others which come from scholarly hands.

(c.) Examine the parallel passages and note any points, explanations, and facts thus given or suggested.

By "parallel passages" we mean not only the few similar passages indicated in the margin, but all other teachings of the Bible bearing on the same topic or subject. These will help to

explain, unfold, and sometimes modify the text chosen, as nothing so safely explains Scripture as Scripture itself. Books of Biblical analysis which arrange the chief passages of Scripture according to topics will be found more valuable in this respect than the ordinary Bible concordances.

2. **Other Books.** Next to the Bible comes the preacher's library from which to gather sermon material. Here the process should be as follows:

(a.) **Examine the best Critical and Practical Commentaries** on the text, and add their points to those already made. Since English students have access to translations of many of the best German commentaries, and now to a Lutheran Commentary published in this country, there is no excuse for any Lutheran preacher to be dependent on commentators not of our church or its faith.

(b.) When the subject is a doctrinal one, your **lectures and studies in Dogmatics** should be reviewed, and the Confessional books of our church re-read on the subject.

(c.) Books of **original information**, such as Bible dictionaries and religious encyclopedias, Biblical chronology and geography, with reliable maps, books of travel in Bible lands, a standard Life of Christ, and of St. Paul, etc.

(d.) **Sermons** and other writings of able preachers. These should be examined and studied especially as to their mode of treatment, discussion, and illustration of the text or subject.

(e.) Standard books of **history and biog.**



raphy, religious and secular. Josephus, and Stanley's History of the Jewish Church, and your text-books of the history of the Christian Church will often furnish valuable material; and Rollin's history, Plutarch's lives, and similar works relating to ancient or modern times or persons, will give valuable facts for argument or illustration.

(f.) Some reliable works on philosophy and science must not be overlooked. The preacher should keep himself abreast with their advance, discoveries, and theories, not only to meet any false claims to which they may pretend, but to find in them most apt and useful illustrations of scriptural truth. Instead of sneering at science and scientists it is better to make use of their discoveries.

(g.) Familiarity with the best poets is of great value to any public speaker, and especially to preachers. Poetry is of near kin to inspiration in its subjects, lofty sentiments, and manner of expression. Milton's "Paradise Lost" should be read frequently. Its vivid imagery and noble language will be very helpful, as will the writings of other and more recent Christian poets.

3. The World of Nature. Every student of God's Word should also be a student of His works. In the world of Nature God furnishes a vast supply of raw material for sermons, but we must find it and work it up. An intelligent interest in some special branch, like astronomy, botany, geology, entomology, etc., furnishes not only a relief to the mind from other studies, but a charm to hours of recreation and a fund of facts for illustrations which will enrich

any discourse. Happy is the preacher who can read the silent testimony of the rocks, trace the glittering alphabet on the evening sky, and who

.. Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

4. **Men.** Study human nature. The true preacher seeks not only to understand the history, habits, feelings, conversation, prejudices, temptations, sorrows, and struggles of his people, but to sympathize with them in their situations and circumstances. This gives him power and influence in the pulpit, and at the same time furnishes a storehouse of sermon material. His observations should not be confined to the members of his congregation, but in all his intercourse with people of every class and sort his eyes and ears should be open to gather facts and points for argument or illustration.

To this end he should mingle as much as possible with men. Women and children are not to be neglected, but often pastoral visits reach these only. The kind of knowledge most needed will best be gained by getting at the thoughts, hearts, and habits of men.

5. **The preacher himself.** While his own opinions and experience should not be made prominent, they will furnish valuable material. Every sermon should be the preacher's personal contribution to the truth as it has passed through his own brain and heart. Even his own difficulties, weaknesses, and defeats will suggest topics and treatment which may be of

value. He who has been in the battle is best able to caution, counsel, or comfort others. He who drinks at the fountain can readily tell where it is located and what is its value.

## GENERAL REMARKS.

1. When proper materials have thus been gathered from external sources, let them be thoroughly digested and assimilated with your own thoughts, reflections and ideas, your own observations and experience on the subject, before you proceed to write out your discourse.

2. View the subject in all its lights and bearings, and apply to it all questions concerning persons, places, times, manners, etc. : -*i. e.*, ask yourself concerning the text, who? what? where? when? how? why? etc., and the answers suggested will furnish additional material to that already gathered.

As far as possible transport yourself to the place, age, scenery, and circumstances of the text or of its writer. Clearness and vividness, as well as correctness, will thus be gained.

3. The wise preacher will not postpone the gathering of material until he is ready to write his sermons-but constantly-whether in his library or on the street, in the homes of his people or his travels abroad, when walking among the solitudes of nature or the jostling crowds of busy men, will be always gathering material for sermons. From a full well, water can be drawn whenever needed.

Invention or discovery of truth or of mode of treatment and expression will thus become

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a healthy exercise of the mind and a delightful part of your work-will develop your homiletical ability, and make your sermons edifying and full of interest.

4. Always begin this process with **special and earnest prayer** for the aid, illumination, and guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth.