

CHAPTER IX.

ORIGINALITY AND IMITATION.

Every sermon should be the product of the man who preaches it. To preach other men's sermons is dishonorable to the preacher and dishonest to the congregation.

At this day it may seem impossible to be original, *i.e.*, to say anything new. Whatever may be said has already been said, and in a way upon which it may be hard to improve. Confined as ministers are to gospel themes they must be content to put in their own way what has been presented a thousand times before. Shall we be satisfied therefore in being simply repeaters and imitators of others, or shall we aim at originality in our sermons?

1. Entire originality should not be attempted. We cannot create. That which is old cannot be made entirely new; "there is nothing new under the sun." Those who determine to be absolutely original, either make themselves ridiculous or fall into grave errors. Many of the prevalent false doctrines whereby simple souls are deceived come from the desire in some preachers to be accounted original and say something new. "That which is true is not new, and that which is new is not true."

2. Nevertheless every preacher should have some element of originality in his

preaching. Every sermon should be a new contribution to the truth, *i.e.*, it should be the old truth coming through a new personality. The theme and substance of the sermon cannot be new, but it comes through another man's apprehension and experience of it, and in that respect it is the preacher's own and not another man's.

3. This individuality or originality may appear in various ways:

a. In the selection of texts and statement of themes.

Striking texts may be discovered in passages of Scripture which were rarely or never used before. Simply to have an odd and curious text has led some men to ridiculous selections which defeated rather than aided the great end of preaching. To twist out of a passage a meaning it does not have or teach, cannot be too strongly condemned or scrupulously avoided. Yet those who are content to take the familiar texts which congregations have heard again and again, deprive their sermons of a freshness and interest they ought to possess. An apt and new text has made many a preacher as famous as the sermon itself, and his name remains associated with it whenever such text is read or mentioned. Happy is the "householder which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old."

b. In the interpretation, development, and disposition of the sermon.

Luther was not the author of the doctrine of repentance or of justification by faith, but he gave them a new development and position. Old jewels in new settings may seem

ORIGINALITY.

entirely new. "Other men labored and we are entered into their labors" not only to enjoy their results but to penetrate yet a little deeper. Ruskin says "genius is only an unusual power of seeing," and therefore every scholarly mind possesses some power of originality.

The plan or disposition of the sermon may likewise manifest it; just as the architect's originality is seen in the plan he devises, and not in the material of which the building is constructed.

c. In its language and style of composition.

Carlyle is not so much an original thinker as writer. It is his peculiar construction of sentences and his way of stating his sentiments that has given him distinction among authors. Luther's vigorous language and his use of words intelligible to all, added greatly to his originality. So it is the way preachers put things, whether in arguing a point, narrating an incident, or making an appeal, that gives strength or weakness to a sermon. The doctrine is not his own, but its statement is, and in this his personality will appear.

d. Or it may pertain to the delivery.

It would be well if more preachers would be more original, *i.e.*, would be themselves in the delivery of their sermons. No class of public speakers are less natural, in tone, utterance, and often in gesture than ministers of the gospel, who ought to be the most natural. Few preach in the same tones and ease of manner in which they converse. There is a style of delivery very common to most of those

who enter the pulpit, which is heard nowhere else, and ought to be avoided. Every preacher's voice and manner of delivery should be his own; revealing his personality and manhood.

In some or all of these, a proper originality may and should appear; not an originality which consists in doing things different from all others, or aims at independence of all recognized laws and customs, but which works by the best rules and laws until the preacher has mastered and made them his own. Thus he may become, not a mere conduit of other men's thoughts, but a fountain imparting freshness, delight, and life in every sermon he preaches.

There are three sources of intelligence; instruction, intuition, and inspiration. The first comes from without, the last from above, but intuition or instinct is our own aptitude in seeing or apprehending truth and the ways in which it may be applied or used. This power or gift should be cultivated and developed, as it makes our work eminently our own.

IMITATION AND THE STUDY OF MODELS.

Closely connected with what has been said about Originality, is the matter of imitating and studying other men as models.

Young men are strongly tempted to imitate public speakers whom they admire. Some may do it unconsciously, while others do it purposely. It relates chiefly to the delivery of their sermons, but we insert what we have to say about it in this place as best fitting.

IMITATION.

1. Direct imitation is injurious, and should be avoided.

(a.) It is **destructive of your own personality.** You become the slave of the man you imitate instead of being your own master, or at least you are a mere copyist. God made you on your own model; not in the mould of somebody else. No man with proper self-respect can be content to be like an old book published under a new title as the only change.

(b.) You are **not competent to select the best models.** It is in the days of youth when this temptation comes, when judgment is not yet ripened, and immature or wrong ideas have not been corrected by experience. If a man is competent to decide who is the best model, he is competent to do without any, and to be himself.

(c.) You are **apt to imitate their defects.** Eminent preachers have peculiarities which may become them, but would be out of place or ridiculous in anyone else. Yet these defects or singularities are the points in which the imitation is chiefly apparent. Some peculiarity of pronunciation, posture, or apparel may be the chief point of resemblance. They "become John the Baptist only in raiment."

2. The careful study of models may be profitable.

(a.) **Preachers** who have gained reputation and success should be heard and observed, so as to discover the secret of their strength, and also their points of weakness. If the latter are observed it will keep you from becoming mere copyists or imitators of them. Even poor preachers may be studied to learn what

to avoid. To study men as well as books is a profitable employment, provided blind admiration does not usurp the place of good judgment.

(b.) Sermons, whether heard or read, may possess excellencies after which your own may wisely be modelled. Carefully to examine the work of others may lead to great improvements in your own. The whole structure and arrangement of the sermon, as well as its language and style of composition, should be carefully studied if it be deserving of being a model.

Great care and caution are necessary here to avoid the charge of plagiarism or unauthorized use of the thoughts and especially the language of others. If you attempt to be brilliant at the expense of others you will find your own expense will be sevenfold. Many a man who has attempted to palm off the productions of others as his own has ruined his reputation, both as a scholar and an honest man, beyond recovery. We may make the wisdom, learning, and thoughts of others our own by study and assimilation, and this is entirely lawful; but to reproduce whole sermons, or whole skeletons, or extended passages without giving credit is unjust to their authors, insulting to the intelligence of our hearers, and suicidal to ourselves. When extended quotations are made, credit should and readily may be given. This applies equally to *translated* passages.

(c.) Variety is profitable here. Do not make anyone man or his sermons your exclusive model. Study preachers, not only one of

them. No man combines all excellencies in himself or in his sermons. There will be less danger of slavish imitation if you have a dozen models than if you have only one. Take for your study only what is best and strongest in each, and instead of destroying your own personality they will rather help you to develop it.