

THE INDISPENSABLENESS OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY TO THE PREACHER¹

Benjamin B. Warfield

A growing misconception in training preachers has been the idea that appearance is a substitute for substance, that methodology is more important than content. On the contrary, the preacher's main responsibility to his listeners is to present the truth as expounded in Systematic Theology. To do this, he must himself have a firm grasp on Christian doctrine. This is not to say his preaching must manifest a chilly intellectualism, but that his knowledge of doctrine must combine with a warmly evangelistic spirit. The universally acknowledged principle that what a person believes will determine how he behaves underscores the importance of preaching correct doctrine. Whether he admits it or not, every preacher communicates a set of beliefs, so it is urgent that he know correct Systematic Theology. Theology is the best cultivation of the devotional life of both the preacher and his hearers.

* * * * *

Professor Flint, of Edinburgh, in closing his opening lecture to his class a few years ago, took occasion to warn his students of what he spoke of as an imminent danger. This was a growing tendency to "deem it of prime importance that they should enter upon their ministry accomplished preachers, and of only secondary importance that they should be scholars, thinkers, theologians." "It is not so," he is reported as saying, "that great or even good preachers are formed. They form themselves before they form their style of preaching. Substance with them precedes appearance, instead of appearance

¹From the *Homiletic Review* (February 1897):99-105, as reported in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—II*, John E. Meeter, ed. (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973) 280-88.

being a substitute for substance. They learn to know truth before they think of presenting it. . . . They acquire a solid basis for the manifestation of their love of souls through a loving, comprehensive, absorbing study of the truth which saves souls."² In these winged words is outlined the case for the indispensableness of Systematic Theology for the preacher. It is summed up in the propositions that it is through the truth that souls are saved, that it is accordingly the prime business of the preacher to present this truth to men, and that it is consequently his fundamental duty to become himself possessed of this truth, that he may present it to men and so save their souls. It would not be easy to overstate, of course, the importance to a preacher of those gifts and graces which qualify him to present this truth to men in a winning way—of all, in a word, that goest to make him an "accomplished preacher." But it is obviously even more important to him that he should have a clear apprehension and firm grasp of that truth which he is to commend to men by means of these gifts and graces. For this clear apprehension and firm grasp of the truth its systematic study would seem certainly to be indispensable. And Systematic Theology is nothing other than the saving truth of God presented in systematic form.

The necessity of systematic study of any body of truth which we need really to master will scarcely be doubted. Nor will it be doubted that he who would indoctrinate men with a given body of truth must needs begin by acquiring a mastery of it himself. What has been made matter of controversy is whether Christian truth does lie so at the basis of the Christian hope and the Christian life that it is the prime duty of the preacher to possess himself of it and to teach it. It has been argued that the business of the preacher is to make Christians, not theologians; and that for this he needs not a thorough systematic knowledge of the whole circle of what is called Christian doctrine, but chiefly a firm faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and a warm love toward him as Lord. His function is a practical, not a theoretical one; and it matters little how ignorant he may be or may leave his hearers, so only he communicates to them the faith and love that burn in his own heart. Not learning but fervor is what is required; nay, too

²As reported in *The Scotsman* for Nov. 13, 1888.

much learning is (so it is often said) distinctly unfavorable to his best efficiency. Engagement of the mind with the subtleties of theological construction excludes that absorption in heart-devotion and in the practical work of the ministry, which on its two sides forms the glory of the minister's inner life and the crown of his outer activity. Give us not scholars, it is said, but plain practical men in our pulpits—men whose simple hearts are on fire with love to Christ and whose whole energy is exhausted in the rescue of souls.

Surely, if the antithesis were as is here implied, no voice would be raised in opposition to these demands. If we are to choose between a chilly intellectualistic and a warmly evangelistic ministry, give us the latter by all means. A comparatively ignorant ministry burning with zeal for souls is infinitely to be preferred to a ministry entirely absorbed in a purely intellectual interest in the relations of truths which are permitted to exercise no influence on their own lives and which quicken in them no fervor of missionary love. But the matter cannot be settled by fixing the eye on this extreme only. What should we do with a ministry which was absolutely and blankly ignorant of the whole compass of Christian truth? Obviously it would not be a Christian ministry at all. Let it be admitted, then, that it is possible for men to become so occupied with the purely intellectual aspects of Christian truth as to be entirely unfitted for the prosecution of the Christian ministry. It must be equally allowed that they must have a sound knowledge of Christian truth in order to be qualified to undertake the functions of the Christian ministry at all. The possibility of the abuse of Systematic Theology has no tendency to arraign its usefulness or even its indispensableness to the preacher. A high capacity and love for mathematics may live in a sadly unpractical brain, and, for aught I know, the world may be full of pure mathematicians who are absolutely useless to it; but it does not follow that the practical worker in applied mathematics can get on just as well without any mathematics at all. In like manner, though there may be such a thing as a barren knowledge of even such vital truth as the Christian verities, there is not and cannot be such a thing as a fruitful Christian ministry without a sound and living knowledge of these verities. And it is very much to be deprecated that men should sometimes permit themselves to be driven, through their keen sense of the valuelessness of an inoperative knowledge, to speak as if no

importance attached to that vitalizing knowledge of divine truth without which any true ministry is impossible. The warning given us by the lamented Aubrey Moore is sorely needed in our times. He says: "There are many earnest-minded Christians who are so morbidly afraid of a barren belief that they sometimes allow themselves to talk as if to hold fast to any form of sound words must be formalism; as if, in fact, the belief in a creed were rather dangerous than helpful. It is true, of course, as we all know well, that a right creed cannot save a man, and that when the bridegroom comes many may be found with lamps that have no oil; but surely if we discard our lamps, much of the precious oil we have may be lost."³

The fundamental principle on which the indispensableness to the preacher of a sound knowledge of Christian truth rests is not more surely rooted in a true psychology than it is illustrated by universal experience. That "conduct in the long run corresponds with belief," as Bishop Westcott puts it, "all experience goes to show." And certainly he is entitled to add that "this unquestionable principle carries with it momentous consequences." "Patient investigation," he continues, "will show that no doctrine can be without a bearing on action. . . . The influence of a dogma will be good or bad—that is an important criterion of dogma, with which we are not now concerned—but if the dogma be truly maintained, it will have a moral value of some kind. Every religion, and every sect of every religion, has its characteristic form of life; and if the peculiarities of these forms of life are smoothed away by time, it is only because the type of belief to which they correspond has ceased to retain its integrity and sharpness."⁴ It is therefore that Principal Wace rebukes the "tendency of some modern historians to undervalue the influence upon human nature of variations in religious and moral principles," as "strangely at variance with the evidence before them."⁵ "The history of the world," he adds, "would appear to be in great measure a history of the manner in which religious ideas, often of an apparently abstract and subtle character,

³*Some Aspects of Sin* 20.

⁴*The Gospel of Life* 48, 57.

⁵*The Foundations of Faith* 194-98.

can determine the future of whole races and of vast regions of the earth. . . . The facts of history thus afford conclusive evidence that the instinct of the Christian world, or rather the instinct of mankind, has not been mistaken in attributing extreme importance to those variations in faith, even on points apparently secondary, by which Christendom has been and is still so grievously divided." The whole case is most concisely put in a comprehensive passage in the *Systematic Theology* of the late Prof. John Miley:

A religious movement with power to lift up souls into a true spiritual life must have its inception and progress in a clear and earnest presentation of the vital doctrines of religion. The order of facts in every such movement in the history of Christianity has been, first, a reformation of doctrine, and then, through the truer doctrine, a higher and better moral and spiritual life. . . . Such has ever been and must forever be the chronological order of these facts, because it is the logical order. When souls move up from a sinful life or a dead formalism into a true spiritual life they must have the necessary reasons and motives for such action. . . . If we should be consecrated to God in a life of holy obedience and love, it must be for reasons of duty and motives of spiritual well-being which are complete only in the distinctive doctrines of Christianity. These doctrines are not mere intellectual principles or dry abstractions, but living truths which embody all the practical forces of Christianity. The spiritual life takes a higher form under evangelical Christianity than is possible under any other form, whether ritualistic or rationalistic, because therein the great doctrines of Christianity are apprehended in a living faith and act with their transcendent practical force upon all that enters into this life.⁶

If there be any validity at all in these remarks, the indispensableness of Systematic Theology to the preacher is obvious. For they make it clear not only that some knowledge of Christian truth is essential to him who essays to teach that truth, but that the type of life which is produced by his preaching, so far as his preaching is effective, will

⁶Vol. 1, 48-49; cf. also 40.

vary in direct relation to the apprehension he has of Christian truth and the type of proportion of truth he presents in his preaching. As Bishop Westcott puts it: "Error and imperfection in such a case must result in lives which are faulty and maimed where they might have been nobler and more complete"; and, on the other hand, "right doctrine is an inexhaustible spring of strength, if it be translated into deed."⁷ In directly the same line of remark that saint of God, Dr. Horatius Bonar, urges that: "All wrong thoughts of God, whether of Father, Son, or Spirit, must cast a shadow over the soul that entertains them. In some cases the shadow may not be so deep and cold as in others; but never can it be a trifle. And it is this that furnishes the proper answer to the flippant question so often asked: Does it really matter what a man believes? All defective views of God's character tell upon the life of the soul and the peace of the conscience. We must think right thoughts of God if we would worship him as he desires to be worshiped, if we would live the life he wishes us to live, and enjoy the peace which he has provided for us."⁸ And what is true of the doctrine of God is true of every other doctrine about his ways and works; as Dr. Westcott phrases it, "The same law which holds good of the effect of the ideas of God and of a future life and of the incarnation in their most general form, holds good also of the details of the view upon which they are realized."⁹

Accordingly Dr. Alexander Whyte testifies to the relation of right belief and all the highest devotion, in a striking passage which we cannot forbear quoting somewhat in full. He writes:

One of the acknowledged masters of the spiritual life warns us against "an untheological devotion." "True spirituality," he insists, "has always been orthodox." And the readers of the *Grammar of Assent* will remember with what masterly power and with what equal eloquence it is there set forth that the theology of the Creeds and Catechisms, when it is rightly understood and properly

⁷Westcott, *Gospel of Life* 58.

⁸*The Gospel of the Spirit's Love* 22.

⁹Westcott, *Gospel of Life* 55.

employed, appeals to the heart quite as much as to the head, to the imagination quite as much as to the understanding. And we cannot study Andrewes' book [his *Private Devotions*], his closet confession of faith especially, without discovering what a majesty, what a massiveness, what a depth, and what a strength, as well as what an evangelical fervor and heartsomeness, his theology has given to his devotional life. . . . In the *Grammar* its author says that for himself he has ever felt the Athanasian Creed to be the most devotional formulary to which Christianity has given birth. We certainly feel something not unlike that when Andrewes takes up the Apostles' Creed, or the Nicene Creed, or the Life of our Lord, or his Names, or his Titles, or his Offices. When Andrewes takes up any of these things into his intellect, imagination, and heart, he has already provided himself and his readers with another great prayer and another great psalm. So true is it that all true theology is directly and richly and evangelically devotional.¹⁰

Readers of Dr. Palmer's *Life of Thornwell* will recall a parallel testimony to what the reading of the Westminster Confession did for Thornwell's soul; and we can ourselves testify from experience to the power of the Westminster Confession to quicken religious emotion, and to form and guide a deeply devotional life. "So true is it," to repeat Dr. Whyte's words, that "all true theology is directly and richly and evangelically devotional."

It cannot be a matter of indifference, therefore, what doctrines we preach or whether we preach any doctrines at all. We cannot preach at all without preaching doctrine; and the type of religious life which grows up under our preaching will be determined by the nature of the doctrines which we preach. We deceive ourselves if we fancy that because we scout the doctrines of the creeds and assume an attitude of studied indifference to the chief tenets of Christianity we escape teaching a system of belief. Even the extremest doctrinal indifferentism, when it ascends the pulpit, becomes necessarily a scheme of faith. As a bright writer in *The Atlantic Monthly* puts it, men are always found believers in either the head or the tail of the coin. Even "Renan's followers have their pockets crammed with beliefs of

¹⁰*Lancelot Andrewes and His Private Devotions* 49-51.

their own, bawling to the public to try them; they trundle their push-carts down the boulevard, hawking new creeds: *Par ici, mes amis, par ici! Voici des croyance neuves, voici la Verite!*"¹¹ Beliefs old or beliefs new, we all have them; and when we take our place in the rostrum in their behalf we perforce become their teachers. There may be Christian truths of which we speak as if they were of infinitesimally little importance, because, as Aubrey Moore caustically puts it, "from first to last we know infinitesimally little about them";¹² but we need not fancy that we are teaching nothing in so speaking of them, or are failing to preach a dogmatic faith or by it to mold lives in essaying to occupy a position of indifference. To withhold these truths from our hearers is not merely a negative act, nor can their loss act merely negatively upon their spiritual development. A mutilated gospel produces mutilated lives, and mutilated lives are positive evils. Whatever the preacher may do, the hearers will not do without a system of belief; and in their attempt to frame one for the government of their lives out of the fragments of truth which such a preacher will grant to them, is it any wonder if they should go fatally astray? At the best, men will be "driven to a kind of empirical theologizing, attempting with necessarily imperfect knowledge to coordinate for themselves the truths of religion and those which follow as consequences from them";¹³ and so will build up an erroneous system of belief which will mar their lives. At the worst, they will be led to discard the neglected or discredited truths, and with them the whole system of Christianity—which they see, even though the preacher does not see, to be necessarily correlated with them; and so will lapse into unbelief. In either case, they may rightly lay their marred or ruined lives at the preacher's door. It is not given to one who stands in the pulpit to decide whether or not he shall teach, whether or not he shall communicate to others a system of belief which will form lives and determine destinies. It is in his power only to determine what he shall teach, what system of doctrine he shall press upon the acceptance

¹¹Henry T. Sedgwick, Jr., in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1896):188.

¹²Moore, *Some Aspects of Sin* 26.

¹³Ibid., 25.

of men, by what body of tenets he will seek to mold their lives and to inform their devotions.

By as much, however, as the communication of a system of belief is the inevitable consequence of preaching, by so much is the careful formation of his system of belief the indispensable duty of the preacher. And this is but another way of saying that the systematic study of divine truth, or the study of Systematic Theology, is the most indispensable preparation for the pulpit. Only as the several truths to be presented are known in their relations can they be proclaimed in their right effects on the soul's life and growth. Systematic Theology is, in other words, the preacher's true text-book. Its study may be undertaken, no doubt, in a cold and unloving spirit, with the mind intent on merely scholastic or controversial ends. In that case it may be for the preacher an unfruitful occupation. But so undertaken it has also lost its true character. It exists not for these ends, but to "make wise unto salvation." And when undertaken as the means of acquiring a thorough and precise knowledge of those truths which are fitted to "make wise unto salvation," it will assuredly bear its fruit in the preacher's own heart in a fine skill in rightly dividing the word of truth, and in the lives of the hearers as a power within them working a right attitude before God and building them up into the fulness of the stature of symmetrical manhood in Christ.