

# SIMPLICITY IN PREACHING

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## SIMPLICITY IN PREACHING<sup>1</sup>

**K**ing Solomon says, in the book of Ecclesiastes, ‘Of making many books there is no end’ (*Eccles.* 12:12). There are few subjects about which that saying is more true than that of preaching. The volumes which have been written in order to show ministers how to preach are enough to make a small library. In sending forth one more little treatise, I only propose to touch one branch of the subject. I do not pretend to consider what should be the substance and matter of a sermon. I purposely leave alone such points as ‘gravity, unction, liveliness, warmth’, and the like, or the comparative merits of written or extempore sermons. I wish to confine myself to one point, which receives far less attention than it deserves. That point is simplicity in language and style.

I ought to be able to tell my readers something about ‘simplicity’, if experience will give any help. I began preaching forty-five years ago, when I first took orders in a poor rural

<sup>1</sup> The substance of this paper was originally addressed, as a lecture, to a clerical audience, at St Paul’s Cathedral, on behalf of the Homiletical Society.

For a certain roughness and abruptness of style I must apologize. But my readers must kindly remember that the lecture was spoken and not written, and is prepared for the press from the notes of a shorthand writer.

parish, and a great portion of my ministerial life has been spent in preaching to labourers and farmers. I know the enormous difficulty of preaching to such hearers, of making them understand one's meaning, and securing their attention. So far as concerns language and composition, I deliberately say that I would rather preach before the University at Oxford or Cambridge, or the Temple, or Lincoln's Inn, or the Houses of Parliament, than I would address an agricultural congregation on a fine hot afternoon in the month of August. I have heard of a labourer who enjoyed Sunday more than any other day in the week, 'Because', he said, 'I sit comfortably in church, put up my legs, have nothing to think about, and just go to sleep.' Some of my younger friends in the ministry may some day be called to preach to such congregations as I have had, and I shall be glad if they can profit by my experience.

Before entering on the subject, I wish to clear the way by making four prefatory remarks.

(a) For one thing, I ask all my readers to remember that to attain simplicity in preaching is *of the utmost importance* to every minister who wishes to be useful to souls. Unless you are simple in your sermons you will never be understood, and unless you are understood you cannot do good to those who hear you. It was a true saying of Quintilian, 'If you do not wish to be understood, you deserve to be neglected.' Of course the first object of a minister should be to preach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but 'the truth as it is in Jesus'. But the next thing he ought to aim at is, that his sermon may be understood; and it will not be understood by most of his hearers if it is not simple.