

THE INDISPENSABLENESS OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY TO THE PREACHER*

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 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."¹ 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 goes to make him an "accomplished preacher." But it is ob-

viously 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 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 compara-

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¹As reported in *The Scotsman* for Nov. 13, 1888.