

## What to Preach

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Many of you expect to preach tomorrow. What will be your subject? A good many years ago some one on Saturday put this question to brother \_\_\_\_\_. He had prepared a sermon on Satan and when he was asked, “\_\_\_\_\_”, What are you going to preach about tomorrow?”, he said, “I am going to give them the devil.” Now that seemed pretty rough. Yet that was one phase of Christ’s own preaching, and we are to follow Him. He said more about the devil, the eternal judgement and the punishment of the wicked than any one of his apostles, and I rather think he said more than all of them put together, so far as we find their words in the New Testament. How should you determine what to preach, what subject to preach on, tomorrow and all the time hereafter? Perhaps some of you are prepared to answer, “I have but one sermon.” Well, the thing is, if that is all and that one is worth preaching, go on and preach it. A man can scarcely preach a sermon that is anything like what a sermon ought to be without doing some good. So, if you have only one, don’t be afraid to preach that one. And if you have to preach twice before you get another, preach the same sermon twice, but make an improvement on it every time. Once I heard Moses E. Lard, preaching in the old Main Street Church, announce a subject on which he had preached five times before to that congregation. He said, “It may surprise you that I have announced to you a subject upon which I have preached five times before, but, if it has taken me twenty years to study and work up this sermon I don’t think there is any danger of your learning all that is in it by hearing it only five times.” Then he went on and delivered it. I watched the audience, and I think they were as deeply interested in it as though that were the first time they had ever heard it.

But how is a man to determine what subject to preach on; if he has a number of sermons? Shall he say, “Well, a certain one that I have will enable me to show off what little learning I have and I will give them that?” That would be to preach yourself instead of preaching Christ. Shall he say, “A certain one that I have will enable me to show off as a preacher better than any of the others. I will give them that tomorrow?” Well, that is doing the same thing. That is to preach yourself instead of preaching Christ. I think that the principle on which we are to determine the selection of the subject depends upon what preaching is for. “To save yourself and those who hear you.” That sermon, then, of all that you are able to preach tomorrow, by which you

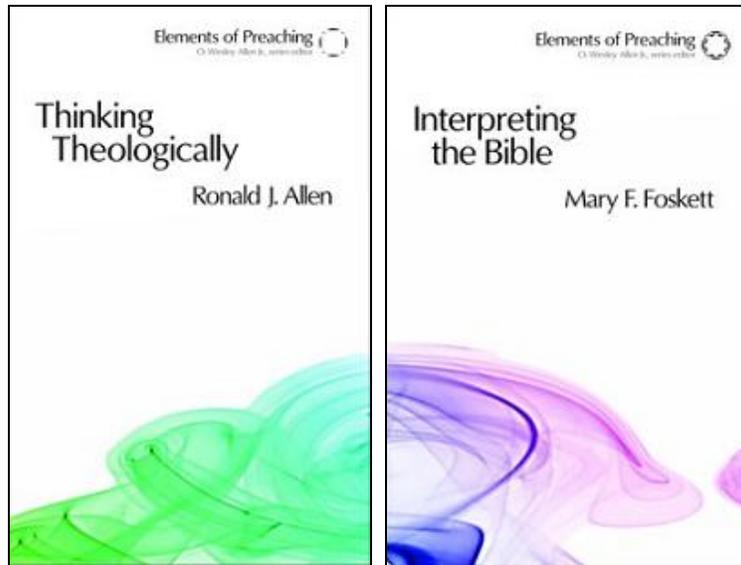
can have the greatest hope of saving somebody in the audience; and thereby save yourself is the one you ought to preach tomorrow, and so every other time you are called upon to preach.

But, what have you got to do in order to save men? Well, you have got to make them believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and repent of their sins. These are two very great undertakings. Which is the greater? There is a very common mistake among preachers in thinking that the great talk is to inspire men with faith. But it is easy for men to believe in this country. It is very difficult for a young man or a young woman growing up in this country to become an unbeliever. A good many try it. A good many young men and young women try to s[h]ake off all the impression that the gospel has made on their minds and hearts. And they think sometimes that they have accomplished it. But let some disease seize you, death come near, and the grave seem to yawn, what will that infidelity do? In nine cases out of ten it passes away. It is not very difficult in this country for men to believe, and it is very difficult for them not to believe. But how about repentance? To bring men to repentance as written in the gospel is the great task at which the Savior himself made a comparative failure. We are told that he upbraided the cities because they repented not a[n]d showed that it would be more tolerable in the day of judgement for Sodom and Gomorrah because Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented if they had had the chance of these cities. The skillful general in invading a city directs his heaviest artillery against the strongest fortifications of his foe. And so in the most difficult task of the preacher, bringing men to repentance, against that stronghold he should direct his heaviest artillery. To that he should devote his mind, his thoughts and his efforts in the pulpit and in the study and thus save the greater number. The apostle Paul says that the goodness of God leads you to repentance. Evidently by the power of a sense of gratitude to God for his goodness. Well, then, any effort that you may make to impress upon men's minds and conscience the goodness of God to them individually is one of the means by which to bring them to repentance.

We are also told in the Old Testament and in the New that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. That is not as popular a thought in the modern pulpit as it was in the pulpit of generations past. The idea of preaching the fear of God, the terror of the judgment and of hell is becoming unpopular. Not so with the apostles. We are told that God is love and that is true, but it is equally true that God is a consuming fire. He is one thing to the one class and another to the other. Every thing that you can do to make men fear God and to thus [bring] them to repentance is the best thing and the most important thing in this country in saving their souls. And to neglect that is to

neglect the most important thing. The apostle Paul gives his estimation of that when he says to his brethren, "I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God, and I call you to witness that I am free from the blood of all men.[?]" Had he withheld anything that would have been profitable to their souls, he considered that he would have been guilty of the blood of men. I advise you, then, young men, to keep this thought in view. When preaching was my chief business in life, before my whole soul became in teaching, many a time have I wished and prayed above all other things that I asked for the power to bring men to repentance. I felt that that was my greatest weakness, my greatest failure. I could interest men generally. I never had much trouble in that way. I could see that men were paying attention to what I was saying. I often had my eye upon some individual in the audience whom I was trying and praying to bring to repentance, but all in vain. I very well remember a man who moved to the community where I was preaching. He was a very proud man in his feelings and in his family connections. He had married a humble, but most excellent Christian young woman who was a member of the Christian church. He had been so trained that he had a supreme contempt for what was known as the Campbellites. He had been brought up in a Presbyterian family, as I remember. His wife had brought her church letter with her when she moved, but before she got a chance to put it in he got hold of it and hid it. He would not go to church with her. Finally she managed to find where he had hid her letter. And one Sunday when he was gone she came and put in her membership. He was too much of a gentleman to make any fuss or outcry about it, but there they lived without very often darkening the door of the church. Finally she managed to invite me to go with her to supper on Sunday evenings. He was too much of a gentleman to let his wife go off to meeting with the preacher and have to come home by herself. So he would go to church with us. Well I never succeeded in bringing that man to repentance, but in the course of a year or two I heard of his debating on religious questions with men in his store, for he was a merchant, and always taking our side of the argument. This gave me some hope that he might be brought to repentance, but he was still impervious. Months and perhaps years went on and God took hold of him. He loved his wife as well as any man ever did I suppose. She was taken sick and grew worse and worse until she died. A few weeks after her death he was at church and when the invitation was given he came forward weeping vehemently to make the good confession. See how much it took to bring that man to repentance. You may witness in your congregation many a man like that. Do your best with any such man and leave the results to God. But keep this in mind all the time, that there are men in your congregations

that will die in their sins and be condemned if you do not bring them to repentance. There [are] men in the audience outside of the church, men in a miserable condition. If you would bring home many sheaves with you as we have just sung, keep this in mind and labor to this end in preparing every sermon that you preach.



Elements of Preaching  
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